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PC PowerPlay

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>PCPP #260

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TIDES OF TORMENT

It has been four years since the Torment: Tides of Numenera kickstarter was successfully completed. At the time the kickstarter was a record, achieving the highest pledged amount of any videogame. It also achieved its initial pledge goal in a little under six hours, so there's that too. Now this month after a slight delay - the game was originally slated for December 2014 - Torment has finally been released. It's another of what I like to call AAA Indie games. Games that, whilst not having the cultural ubiquity of some AAA franchises, are still covered in the same manner as those with a big studio, budget and publisher behind them.

AAA titles are going nowhere, of course. Next month we'll be review Ghost Recon: Wildlands, Nier: Automata and more big budget titles, but going forward these AAA indies and the studios that create them are going to become a far bigger factor in the industry than they are now. In February, Ghost Story, a new AAA indie studio set up by former members of Irrational Games announced their goal to create both mechanically and narratively challenging games and said they were actively prototyping their first game. Harebrained Schemes is currently working hard on Battletech. InXile have Wasteland 3 and Pillars of Eternity 2 on the boil. There's Lord British's long in gestation opus Shroud of the Avatar: Forsaken Virtues (if it is released before the inevitable heat death of the universe), Divinity: Original Sin 2, Kingdom Come: Deliverance, much of Devolver Digital's stable, like Absolver and Ruiner, and a whole heap more on the way this year and the next.

It's an exciting time to be a PC gamer. More and more experienced development teams are starting to step outside the studio system and look to crowdfunding or alternate investment structures to create games that they are driven to make. While there are still the usual concerns about revenue in these studios, the smaller teams and lower budgets for games allow them to take risks that AAA dev studios could not. Think of it this way - do you think Activision, Bethesda, Ubisoft, Namco Bandai or any of the other big publishers would back a game set in a deliberately strange world that has a script totalling around 1.2 million words with a fixed isometric perspective over pre-rendered backgrounds?

Daniel Wilks
Sleepy Jack
@drwilkenstein

QUOTES OF THE MONTH

"That's going straight in the grudge book"

"Dooh-dah dooh-dah day. Giddy-up"

"Gonna cook it up like a bucket of ham"

PC PowerPlay

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Inbox

Cars are expensive, unless you find alternate means of purchase

LETTER OF THE MONTH WINS!

Write in to PCPP with your rants, considered opinions, and endless run-on sentences of pure awesome. The address is letters@pcpowerplay.com.au. Each letter read by hand! This month Oliver scores himself a 2Tb FireCuda drive courtesy of the good people at Seagate.

CAVEAT EMPTOR

Hi Guys,

Love the mag and I've been reading since the very early days of PC PowerPlay, it's taken me a while to drop you guys a line but here we go:

I am a bit miffed about the news that Steam (IMO an overpriced service) is now adding GST to the games if they are purchased here.

I have always tried where I can to be loyal to Steam but when I think about the last dozen or so games I activated through the Steam service I didn't purchase them directly.

I'm a big fan of the humble bundle for a couple of reasons, it's a feel good purchase as you're doing something charitable whilst getting a great discount. Sometimes you come across gems you may never have purchased at full retail. It's a great service and it's very easy to use and activate. You can also be generous with unused or double up game codes which is pretty cool.

I'm much less of a fan of services like Kinguin and G2A, I hear bad reports about them and there are some sneaky subscription services that they will get you signed up to if you don't read the small print. With this risk comes reward, and if you manage to stay away from the questionable offers on the site and you're savvy you can dig out some incredible bargains.

From what I can gather these sites work like ebay but for game codes, the actual information you find on their websites is scarce and deliberately vague so it's definitely buyer beware.

In saying the above I reluctantly use them for 90% of my purchases now, I'm married and we have a child and saving for a mortgage with one standard wage coming in, I still want to enjoy the latest games so this is my compromise.

Here's a quick example, I recently was gifted a Logitech G29 by a friend, I wanted to purchase Project Cars and all of the DLC to get my race face on, through Steam this would have set me back $75.99 (US Dollarydoos!) which was well out of my range.

A quick search of G2A – located a key with all DLC – 19 bucks! How is that even possible? You'd never find a yawning gap like that in a product at retail level and I for one would have a serious case of buyer's remorse had I paid the $75 USD for the exact same game.

I've heard the horror stories but in my personal experience all games I've purchased through these companies have been legit. I've never had an issue with activation and I have saved hundreds, maybe thousands of dollars.

I'd be interested to hear what experiences good or bad other people have had? You only see the negative online.

Oliver Thresher.

Hi Oliver – from what we understand, most of the steam key reseller sites work as something of a go-between for people who have unwanted keys (or bought a bunch through sites like Humble, Bundlestars and the like to later sell for a profit), and those looking for keys. The Ebay analogy is pretty accurate. G2A, Kinguin and the like are intermediaries – a service for buying and selling rather than sellers themselves. With any service like that, you always have to read the fine print and be careful. On the GST front, at least Australia's not alone in getting slapped with more fees. Now if only we could get some kind of price parity thing going on instead of getting an Australia tax added on to most AAA titles before the GST is even calculated.

FEEDBACK #259

› Josh Van Der Sloot: Im a reelstand operator at Bluestar Web which is the company who prints PCPP and I love getting the chance to check out the magazine before everyone else haha

› Ranjoy Biswas: I still have so many early issues and PCPP was a big reason as to why I'm still mostly a PC gamer now. So many fond memories of my childhood dreaming about getting a Voodoo 2 but could never afford it haha.

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JOE, 15, RYDE, NSW

This month's MY PC brought to you by RAZER

MOST IMPRESSIVE ELEMENTS:
1. Intel Core i5 4590S
2. 1TB 2.5 inch Western Digital Blue HD
3. 1x 29 inch Widescreen 2560 x 1080 Full 1080p IPS Monitor
4. Launchpad Mini

MY LAST UPGRADE: The i5 4590S that replaced my old Intel i3 processor that came with the lowest configuration of the Alienware Alpha R1 and 4GB to 8GB of DDR3 RAM. My most recent upgrade (about a month ago) was my 1TB 2.5 inch WD HDD which replaced my older 500GB HDD that was with the Alienware Alpha R1.

MY DREAM UPGRADE: A whole new gaming rig, along the lines of a new Asus GTX 1080 Strix and i7 6700K.

MY FAVORITE FEATURE: The Intel Core i5 4590S may not be the most powerful and shiniest processor today, but it can run triple A titles such as Overwatch and GTA V at Medium settings, at 1080p, at around 30-40 frames per second.

WHAT MAKES MY PC SO SPECIAL?
3 years ago, I wanted a PC or console for christmas that was not going to break the bank but was powerful enough to r triple A titles. I decided to go with a pre-built system (Alienware Alpha R1) and since then I have used it for all my gami needs. While it was pre-built at the low config, I've upgraded it many times.

1. Is that a Novation Launchpad board spy?
2. A fan of Takashi Miike films?
3. It may not be the most powerful, but the Alienware Alpha R1 is an elegant compact machine
4. Need a new monitor you do not
5. We're guessing you probably like rac games
6. Cameron Ferris, our advertising manager uses the exact same headphones

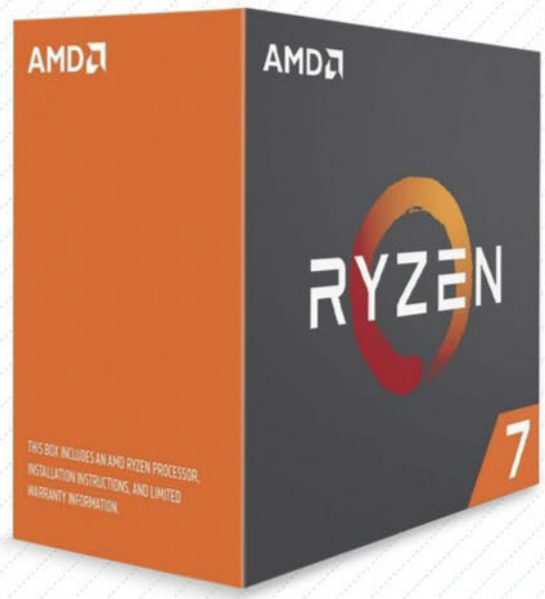
JOE WINS!

Thanks to the good people at Razer, Joe scores himself an Ornata keyboard. Enjoy!

WANT FREE STUFF? Send your MyPC entry today to *mypc@pcpowerplay.com.au*. Include the four most impressive elements of its hardware, your last upgrade, your dream upgrade, your favourite feature and what you think makes your PC special. Make sure to include your name, age and location. And last but not least, attach a 5MP or bigger image of your PC! No camera phone shots, and make sure it's in focus!

RAZER UPGRADES THE BLADE 14" GAMING LAPTOP TO KABY LAKE

Razer has updated its popular Blade range of 14" gaming notebooks for 2017. The new Razer Blade gets the latest i7-7700HQ Intel Kaby Lake CPU with Speed Shift v2, 16GB of DDR4-2400 memory soldered on the mainboard and the option of 256GB, 512GB and now, 1TB NVMe PCIe SSDs. The graphics card gets bumped up to an NVidia GTX1060 with 6GB of GDDR5 memory and HDMI 2.0b output. There's also Thunderbolt 3/ USB-C, Razer's Chrome anti-ghosting keyboard, Killer Wireless-AC 1535 and a 70Wh battery. Razer has two screen options available - a non-touch 1080p matte display or a 4K UHD glossy touch screen. All this power is packed in a svelte 1.86kg package (if you get the 4K display, the weight goes up to 1.95kg). Pricing for the new Razer Blade starts at AU$2799.95 and it is available now.



AMD ANNOUNCES AVAILABILITY OF RYZEN CPUS

AMD has finally announced pricing and availability for its much awaited, new from-scratch design, Ryzen CPUs. The top-end Ryzen 7 CPUs will be released first and should start landing in PC stores around March 3rd in Australia. The mid-range Ryzen 5 and entry level Ryzen 3 CPUs will be out in the coming months. Practically every PC store locally is already taking pre-orders for the Ryzen 7 chips. In AMD's provided benchmarks for Cinebench R15, the Ryzen 7 appears to match or beat Intel's 6th-generation flagship i7-6900K, but priced less than half of what Intel wants for their CPU. AMD even claims their performance goals are even better than they expected, with a 52% improvement in instructions per clock than the previous "Excavator" core CPUs. Independent benchmarks are yet to arrive, but it seems like AMD is on to a winner with Ryzen.

MSI HAS A NEW RANGE OF SHORT GRAPHICS CARDS FOR MINI-ITX BUILDS

MSI has a new range of graphics cards designed for Mini-ITX rigs. The MSI Aero ITX cards are shorter than usual, to allow them to fit in the cramped ITX cases that are popular these days. The Aero cards use Nvidia's GTX 1050, 1050 Ti, 1060 and 1070 GPUs, spread across a range of memory and pre-overclocked options. To get the cards in such a small package, MSI has developed an incredibly compact heatsink comprised of 8mm copper super pipes, laid out across the GPU for optimal cooling. The Aero ITX range also utilises a special TORX fan to accelerate airflow across the compact heatsink. The GTX 1050 cards are a bit smaller than the GTX 1060 ones, which themselves are smaller than the GTX 1070. They also cost a bit more to account for the fancier heatsink and fan setup required.

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* Maximum performance values for the 960 PRO. Results may vary based on the user environment.

LOGITECH RELEASE A 4K WEBCAM

and 4K 30 fps resolutions when plugged in to a USB 3.0 port. Logitech's RightLight 3 HDR feature automatically adjusts the exposure across multiple points in the image to create an evenly lit image. The Brio has an infrared sensor that is certified for Windows Hello's facial recognition authentication, so you can log in to Windows without a password, just your face. Built-in dual omni-directional mics with noise cancellation keep background noise to a minimum. The Brio has multiple mounting options, including clip and tripod mounts, so you can place the camera anywhere that suits you. RRP is $379.95 and is available now.

STEAM TO START CHARGING AUSTRALIAN CUSTOMERS GST IN JULY

t charging GST for Australian customers soon. This is f new legislation, popularly known as the "Netflix Tax", that aims to make multinational companies based overseas, but selling in Australia, to pay GST on the things they sell here. Because of this, the price of games via Steam on the Australian store will go up by 10%, starting in July 2017. Nobody thought Steam would just absorb the 10% tax, did they? This is on top of the fact Australians already pay more for titles on Steam compared to our American friends. It's not all awful news though - you can still get all your cheap games via Steam redemption codes from various online stores like Green Man Gaming, Humble Bundle and Bundle Stars. Those shops don't charge Australian customers GST. Yet.

SYNOLOGY RELEASE DSM 6.1 WITH EXTENDED BTRFS SUPPORT

Owners of a Synology NAS will notice a new version of the DiskManager Station software ready for them to install. DSM 6.1 brings a slew of new features of interest to existing and potential Synology NAS owners. The headline feature is improved BTRFS support - this allows the ability to auto-detect corrupted files and recover broken data, as well as creating instantaneous snapshots of folders and implementing Samba 4.4 and its instant server-side copy feature. When used with Seagate Ironwolf NAS drives, DSM 6.1 can take advantage of the advanced Seagate IronWolf Health Management (IHM) features that leverages the extra hardware sensors in the Ironwolf drives to monitor your data beyond the usual SMART tools. Not all Synology NAS units can get DSM 6.1 and some features only apply to the Intel-based units, so double check before purchasing or upgrading if the new version of DSM will give you these new features.

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COOL INNOVATION

SEAGATE FIRECUDA CUP

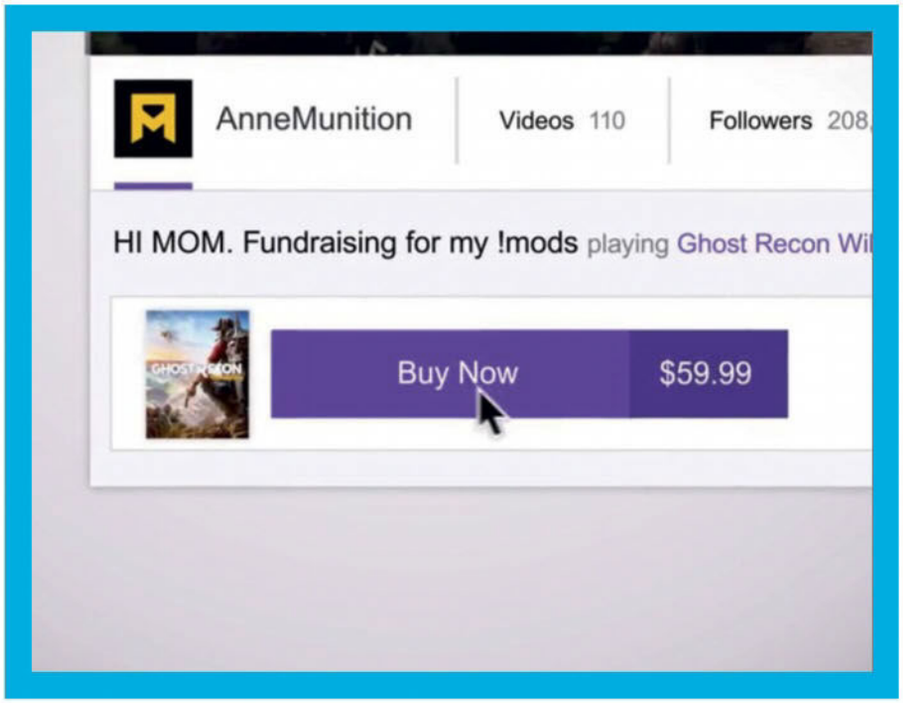
A League of their own

Seagate, with the aid of Double Jump are stepping heavily into the esports arena with the inaugural Seagate FireCuda Cup, a Rocket League tournament. Open to both professional gamers as well as skilled fans, the FireCuda cup will run for seven weeks, starting March 1st and culminating with finals on April 19th. During the competition, all matches will be live streamed. The qualifier tournament, held February 22 separated the wheat from the chaff in the three divisions of the competition, Professional, Main and Amateur. Each of the final divisions is made up of eight teams, each fighting for their piece of the prize money. The Pro tournament has a prize pool of $3200, with $1600 for the first place team, $1000 for the second and $600 for the third. The Main competition boasts a $1300 prize pool, broken down $600, $400, $300 for the top three spots, and the Amateur comp $400, $200 and $100. Both Asus and Seagate are also contributing sponsor prizes to the competition, with Asus giving away three GTX 1050Ti videocards, and Seagate giving away three of their eponymous FireCuda SSHDs. Anyone interested in following the comp can catch the action every Wednesday evening starting at 7pm between March 1 and April 19 on the CyberGamer Twitch channel, ***www.twitch.tv/cgplevent***

TWITCH TO START SELLING GAMES

Objectivity be damned

Twitch recently announced plans to sell games directly through the service in the near future. The deal would include some kind of revenue share deal with streamers. People purchasing games through the service, so long as the game is worth more than $4.99, will receive a "Twitch Crate" filled with some kind of digital goodie related to the game in question. On the surface the idea sound fine, as many gamers use the service as a kind of window onto hands off previews, watching streams of early access or games in beta to decide whether or not to take the plunge. Unfortunately, the current media landscape makes the type of revenue share deal rather fraught with what amounts to paid opinions. In PR speak, streamers are often referred to as "influencers" due to their reach and are often the favoured targets of companies trying to spruik their games to a larger audience without the kind of critical analysis usually expected of the press. By offering revenue share, Twitch is basically giving companies license to use the service as an advertising medium.



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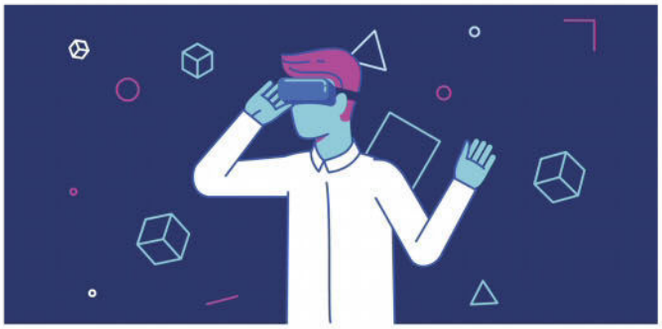
IRRATIONAL TELLS A GHOST STORY

Not so spooky news

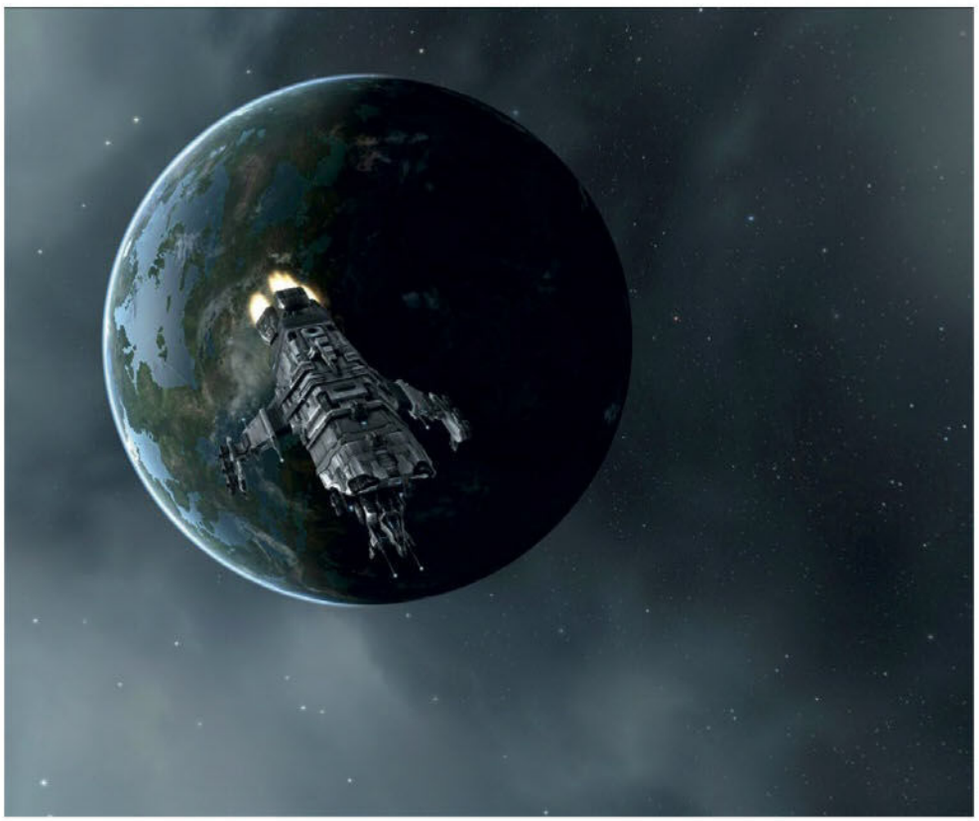
Twelve former Irrational Games developers have banded together to found a new development studio with a mission statement dedicated to creating immersive and challenging story driven games. The team at Ghost Story, which includes former Irrational Games creative director, Ken Levine, art director Shawn Robertson and executive producer Don Roy have been working on concepting and prototyping a new game. According to the team, "While we believe our new games will have strong appeal to fans of BioShock, our new focus allows us to craft experiences where the gameplay is as challenging as the stories." Ghost Story is not yet prepared to share any specifics about the game, but with the talent behind the scenes and the stated ambition of the team, it should prove to be an interesting reveal when it does eventuate.



LG VR HMD

OMG!

LG has announced that the brand is going to once again throw its hat into the VR ring (the company released a phone based VR headset in 2015) with what is being described as a "Next Generation" VR HMD (Head Mounted Display). The South Korean technology giant is planning on unveiling the new HDM at this year's GDC in the Valve booth. The VR team is looking to meet up with developers to collect feedback and criticism of their HMD to help refine and define the unit for a commercial release. No solid details of the unit have been released to the public as yet, but going by the language used in the announcement, it sounds like the technical specs may still be very much up in the air. More details when they come.



EVE ONLINE HELPS HUNT FOR REAL PLANETS

Pandemic Horde Inc. looking to claim more territory?

In a second round of hunting for exoplanets, Eve Online and Project Discovery are teaming up to parse data on real hunks of rock floating in the infinite black. Capsuleers, in conjunction with players and the universities of Geneva and Reykjavik will work together investigating real world data of exoplanets. When comparative consensus on the classification of each piece of data is reached, the data will then be sent back to the University of Geneva for use in refining the parameters used to search for exoplanets. Is there anything Eve Online, the world's most addictive spreadsheet, can't do?

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AUSTRALIA'S PREMIER PC TECH EVENT RETURNS TO MELBOURNE WITH

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PC & Tech Authority, PC PowerPlay, Atomic and Hyper are joining forces once again to bring you another spectacular night of cutting edge PC technology, the latest advances in gaming and the coolest new gear around. The last Upgrade Australia event was hosted in Sydney, so now we're heading back to Melbourne with an all new show with new partners and gear. Get ready to experience the latest PC hardware, talk to experts in the field, witness live demonstrations, feast on free food and drink and stand a pretty good chance of walking away with freebies.

We know you can't wait to get your hands on the latest and greatest PC gear so jump on the website and register right away!

Register at: ***www.pcauthority.com.au/upgradeaustralia***

WHERE: Melbourne 's Monash University, Caulfield Campus
WHEN: May the 3rd, 6pm onwards
WHAT: Upgrade Australia 5.0, a unique PC event that sees the best hardware vendors showing off their latest and greatest technology as well as free food and drink
COST: FREE FOR ALL!

- Go hands-on with the hottest and most cutting edge computer tech
- See some of the greatest case mods in Australia
- Be the first to see demonstrations of tech that hasn't hit the market
- Experience VR in all new ways
- Eat, drink and socialise with like-minded PC enthusiasts
- Win prizes!

Visit www.pcauthority.com.au/UpgradeAustralia

FOR MORE INFORMATION, AND HEAR MORE ABOUT THE EXCITING ATTRACTIONS COMING TO THIS BIG EVENT!

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SOME ARE PC MSI ARE GAMING

Best meets Best – Reach New Heights

> MSI's new Z270 Gaming M7 is a slick beauty with features and performance to match

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MSI, the No.1 Gaming brand goes above and beyond, unleashing the power of the 7th Generation Intel Core i7 Platform; Kaby Lake, to reach new heights for 4K Gaming and the ultimate VR Experience. Gamers are expected to experience 15% (non-OC) to 25% (OC) increase in CPU performance.

This newfound power promises significantly increased performance in multitasking, 4K Video, Multimedia, and an improved VR Virtual Reality Experience.

In addition to the new CPUs, MSI will be implementing Nvidia GeForce GTX 1050 Ti & GTX 1050 graphics into the arsenal so that all users, from casual gamers to eSport professionals can enjoy an even more personalized gaming notebook for work, school, or for killing hordes of zombies, anywhere.

The GTX 1050 Ti brings 15% higher performance compared to the predecessor GTX965M, while the GTX 1050 replaces the GTX960M for performance level gamers and power users.replaces the GTX960M for performance-level gamers and power users.

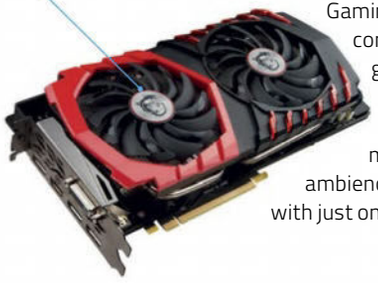
FLAWLESS SUPREMACY WITH Z270 GAMING M7

The MSI Enthusiast Gaming motherboards usher in a new era of gaming. With a unique look and feel, packed with more exclusive gaming features than ever, these Gaming motherboards are sure to offer the best possible gaming experience. One of the most powerful Enthusiast Gaming models, the Z270 Gaming M7, is an incredibly versatile and complete foundation for a high-end gaming system. Features such as Audio Boost 4 PRO and Nahimic 2 provide gamers two sets of audio modules with isolated circuits for a pure sound experience to deliver the competitive edge on the battlefield. The Z270 Gaming M7 motherboard feature RGB Mystic Light, which enables gamers to change the LEDs to any color with a single click of the mouse. All of this, including M.2 Shield and VR Boost, makes the Z270 Gaming M7 the winner of a prestigious CES Innovation award.

ZERO FROZR – STAY UNDETECTED WITH TWIN FROZR VI

MSI Graphics cards feature the impressive Twin Frozr VI thermal design allowing for higher core and memory clock speeds for increased performance in games. The famous eye-catching Twin Frozr cooler is intensified by a fiery red Gaming glow piercing through the cover, while select models feature the MSI Gaming dragon RGB LED on the side, which can be set to any colour to match your mood or build.

The MSI Gaming App allows simultaneous control of both your Motherboard and Graphics Card's overclocking, allowing gamers to quickly switch between OC, Gaming and Silent performance modes. The latest version of MSI Gaming App features One-click to VR, which instantly optimizes your PC for the best Virtual Reality experience. Last but not least, the Gaming App features a LED control tab, allowing gamers to choose from a range of colours and lighting modes to set the right ambience for their gaming sessions with just one click.



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Awarded with an Editor's Choice Award by Tom's Guide as they call it 'A True Console Killer' the Trident has made its stand as the world's smallest VR Ready PC to date. Now upgraded with a Kaby Lake processor, Trident 3 is the pinnacle of small form factor, at only 4.72 litres, whilst boasting the spec of a high performance PC gaming. It features the MSI unique Silent Storm Cooling, with independent air flow make sure the Trident 3 stays cool and quiet when playing the latest games. Under the hood, Trident 3 houses a customized GeForce GTX 1060 3G/6G graphics card with performance levels far above its equally sized console counterparts. MSI Trident 3 is the best and smallest VR ready gaming desktop in the market.

^ Compact gaming PCs need not sacrifice performance, as MSI proves!

QNAP'S EXTREME NEW NAS POWERED BY AMD

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KEY SPECS

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For the ultimate in NAS performance – whether at home or in your office – the Qnap TVS-x73 has it all. Built with a state-of-the-art metal design and topped off with a stylish gold finish, the business-class TVS-x73 series is available in 4, 6, and 8-bay models. It is powered by an AMD RX-421BD quad-core APU (2.1 GHz base, 3.4 GHz boost) and dual-channel 8GB/16GB/64GB DDR4 RAM (up to 64GB), supports four Gigabit LAN ports and two built-in M.2 SSD slots (which can benefit from Qtier Technology to optimize storage efficiency across M.2 SSDs, SATA SSDs and HDDs), and is capable of delivering up to 1,172 MB/s throughput.

Two PCIe slots are available for greater system flexibility. One is pre-installed with a dual-port USB 3.1 Type-A card and the other allows for an optional QNAP dual-port 10GbE (10GBASE-T or SFP+) network card. The 10GbE-enabled TVS-x73 fully satisfies businesses that demand higher bandwidth for virtualization and fast backup and restoration for an ever-growing amount of data.

The TVS-x73 series features AMD 3rd Gen GCN architecture with breakthrough GPU performance to support 4K H.264 video decoding and stunning 4K UHD display, ideal for applications for media storage and playback. With dual HDMI output and a bundled remote control, the TVS-x73 provides users with an ideal base for an optimum audiovisual experience.

COOLER MASTER ANNOUNCES 'CASE MOD WORLD SERIES 2017'

With 25th Anniversary Celebration Bonus

Case modding is reaching incredible heights and Cooler Master is getting behind the scene big time!

The company has announced the 8th installment of the annual Case Mod World Series. The global case modding competition invites anyone from first-time tinkerers to seasoned veterans to make and submit their creations from Feb 3rd to May 3rd. Entrants can treat viewers to photos and descriptions of their mods in their worklog as they work through their projects. In celebration of Cooler Master's 25th Anniversary, a bonus category has been added to this year's contest to encourage entrants to commemorate the iconic products of the last 25 years and honor the classics with new pieces of modding beauty.

"We have created countless product innovations and design break-throughs which paved the way to the standard cases and cooling technology seen today. With this being the 25th year of our company, we wanted to pay tribute by inviting modders to participate in the biggest modding event in the community with a bonus category" said Raymen Wu, Marketing Director.

Cooler Master aims to encourage newcomers to the contest with their new #MASTERBUILD platform. This modding dedicated website is filled with inspiring stories, tutorials, galleries and events aimed at continuously growing and expanding the modding community. Visit mod.coolermaster.com to find out more.

This year, Cooler Master is expanding the scope of the World Series to include regional modding workshops and local meet & greet events in many countries around the world. Modders can share their creative design techniques and passions about all things PC building and modding. These events will allow World Series participants, PC building enthusiasts and Cooler Master fans in general to meet and interact directly with Cooler Master and world class modders. Special limited edition #MASTERBUILD t-shirts will be available to win in limited supply.

The event is being co-sponsored by many leaders in the PC building industry such as Intel, Asus, Nvidia, HyperX and Dremel. Some fantastic prizes totaling over US$40,000 are in store for this year's winners, but there is more reason to get involved than just the jackpot. Modders can share their fantastic creations with a worldwide audience and fire up their creative juices with other local modders through regional events. The registration deadline for this year's competition is March 31st. To get involved and follow updates as the competition unfolds, please visit: **http://makerhub.coolermaster.com/cmws-2017**

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SEAGATE BARRACUDA PRO AND IRONWOLF PRO

WHEN YOU'RE SERIOUS ABOUT YOUR DATA

Leveraging 20 years of trusted performance and reliability, Seagate's range of Barracuda Pro drives are best for high performance desktop, creative pro desktop applications and gaming use. For rock solid, fast and 24x7 operation in a NAS, Seagate's Ironwolf Pro hard drives will get the job done. We also know that life isn't perfect, so for those situations where things aren't going to plan, you can rely on the FREE two years of Seagate's Rescue Data Recovery Services for that additional peace of mind. This is a godsend and forms part of the Barracuda Pro and Ironwolf Pro experience.

BARRACUDA PRO

When you need a hard drive that will store terabytes of data and still provide loads of performance, get a Barracuda Pro. This top of the line hard drive from Seagate, comes in 6TB, 8TB and a whopping 10TB of storage. Yep, 10TB of storage in a single 3.5-inch SATA hard drive - the largest drive capacity available for desktop computers. What a time to be alive!

An impressive 256MB of speedy cache helps speed up the Barracuda Pro, providing ample space for your most accessed data to be retrieved at the speed of light. Seagate's Multi-Tier Caching technology is designed to quickly access frequently used applications and files. More cache = faster HDD, simple as that - and the Barracuda Pro has heaps. This makes it an excellent drive for creative pros or gamers.

Together with that lovely big multi-tier cache the Barracuda Pro packs a brisk 7200RPM spindle speed. Spinning its platters at 7200RPM makes sure random reads and writes happen fast and with little delay. Sequential performance is superb too, with the Barracuda Pro banging out a maximum sustained transfer rate of 220MB/s over a SATA 6Gb/s connection. To top it all off, Seagate offers a 5-year warranty on the Barracuda Pro. Five years!

The 10Tb Barracuda Pro is the fastest large capacity drive around

The Ironwolf is built for heavy use bulk storage

Protect your memories with Seagate Rescue Data Recovery Services

IRONWOLF

If bulk storage is what you're after, Seagate's IronWolf Pro drives are designed specifically for up to 16-bay NAS solutions and up to 300 TB/year Workload Rate Limits (WRL), with capacities offering best in class throughput for improved drive performance and streaming.

With the introduction of 10TB capacity drives, up to 40TB can be stored in a single 4-bay NAS enclosure - 40TB! In one little 4-bay NAS! These 10TB drive provide unheard of density for prosumers, SOHO and SMB users. Seagate has tested IronWolf Pro drives with many top NAS solutions, including Synology, QNAP, Asustor, Buffalo and Drobo, so you know they'll work flawlessly, all day, every day.

Performance wise, the Seagate IronWolf Pro has a sustained data rate of 214MB/s on the 4TB, 6TB, 8TB and 10TB units. Combined with a 7200RPM spindle speed and a large 256MB cache that is double the size of the competition, you've got a recipe for first class speeds.

SEAGATE RESCUE SERVICE

In an industry leading move, Seagate is offering a 2-year **Seagate Rescue Data Recovery Services** plan on the IronWolf Pro and Barracuda Pro drives if you register your drive online. This wonderful service will attempt to recover data off any faulty drives sent to Seagate - regardless of why the drive died.

Rescue DATA RECOVERY SERVICES

The Seas of Cheese

Valve didn't start the indie content glut. But Gabe & Co. might just be the ones to finish it...

I recently had the privilege of attending the launch of a Games Jam – a 48-hour contest where dedicated young amateurs toiled around the clock to make innovative new video games from scratch. Held at a shiny new North Sydney TAFE facility the event was a human hive of activity, with a multi-camera Twitch live stream broadcasting interviews with academics, developers, and middleware executives. They even had a celebrity TV host. The Games Jam was classy, well-attended, well-run, and lent astonishing insights into why the video game market is submerging under such a staggering content glut.

The clues were not subtle. There was the staff member who eagerly pitched TAFE courses to the viewers at home: "You can be a game developer in six months!" There was the panel of four experts who drew blanks when asked what books on game design they'd recommend – only one of them could even think of one. Then there was the creator of a slick application for rapidly generating landscapes who rattled off some statistics to champion the appeal of the Unity platform. Specifically: There are now 770 million Unity gamers in the world, and 5.5 million Unity developers.

I'm not an economist, but I'm pretty sure the world economy can't support 5.5 million video game developers. The vast majority of that number must be students, and hobbyists, and aspiring professionals destined to have their dreams denied them.

Valve's digital distribution service Steam is an accurate weather-vane to measure this trash typhoon. The deluge began in 2014, which saw the launch of more than three times the number of Steam games released in 2013. This trend has only accelerated, with almost 40% of the Steam library released in 2016 – 4,207 games!

When I spoke recently with Stardock founder Brad Wardell he estimated that there would be over *7,000* Steam games launched in 2017. "I can be persuaded that we're in the middle of a pretty big bubble, when it comes to games. There are just a lot more games sharing the same sized pie. And right now, a lot of this growth has been funded by venture capital. Little start-up studios getting money to make a Unity game. Or, now we have VR. The PC market is healthy, it just has a glut of games. Unless that changes, we're going to start seeing some real... it'll be a really interesting couple years."

> "Steam is an accurate weather-vane to measure this trash typhoon"

He told me that part of Stardock's strategy for survival in this market is their unique technology – the Nitrous engine can exploit modern hardware in ways that Unity simply cannot. But as for all the other indies... Read between the lines, and Wardell is predicting a bloodbath.

To their credit, Valve management isn't letting the long tail of crumby content wag their digital distribution dog. The new Steam Direct initiative will replace Steam Greenlight, and set a minimum cost for access to the world's leading online game store.

World of Warcraft co-creator Mark Kern has estimated that the number of new games released on Steam will be cut in half.

As of this writing the fee for Steam Direct has yet to be determined; Valve has hinted that it could be between US$100 and US$5,000. That may sound steep, but five grand isn't a lot of money in the grand scheme of things. I know people who've spent that much on Magic: The Gathering cards. Also, devs with successful games will eventually be able to recoup the fee by paying a temporarily reduced cut of their profits to Valve – the whole point of Steam Direct is to weed out games that don't make any money in the first place. Games that are, in the literal sense, utterly worth less.

The lush fields of shovelware fertilised with Unity stock assets and watered by Steam Greenlight rorting will wither and rot, and leave behind a majestic desert dotted with the ruins of laughably piss-poor visual novels. A certain number of abysmal vanity projects will still make it through, but they also serve a purpose: grist for the mills of YouTube satirists. By this metric alone, Revolution 60 was a rousing success.

Seeing as Steam Direct will benefit both gamers and (legitimate, competent) developers, it would be tempting to attribute these changes to Valve's benevolence. But remember: this is the same company that only cracked down on the toxic practice of Counter Strike: GO skin gambling when legally forced to do so. After four years of this content flood, one suspects that the Valve bureaucracy was perilously close to drowning. PC

JAMES COTTEE is just one of 5.5 million video game journalists. He can't wait for the bloodbath.

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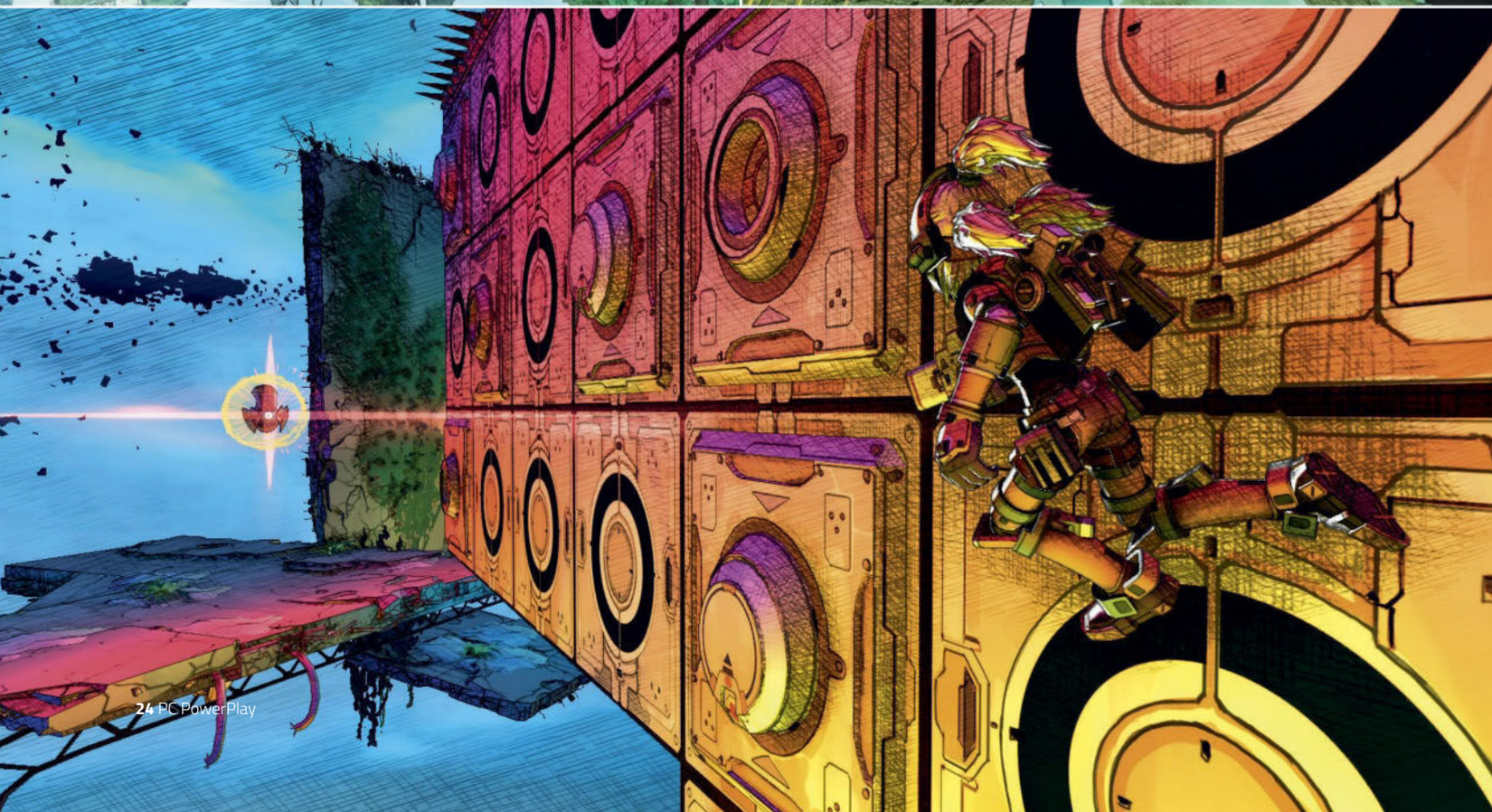
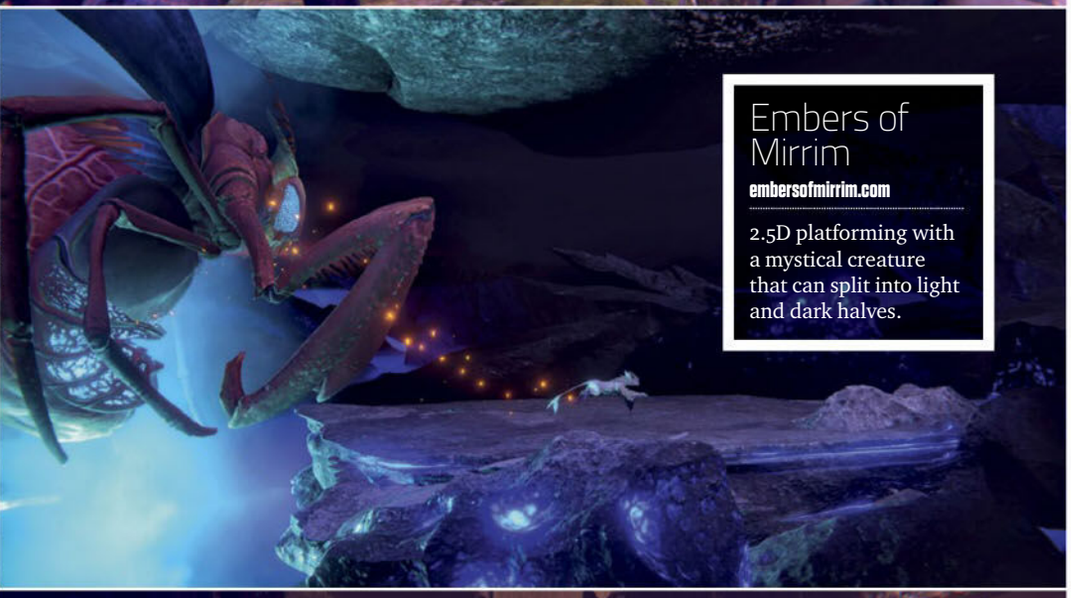
Super Cloudbuilt

coilworks.se

The sequel to the 2014 parkour game Cloudbuilt is even more beautiful than the first.





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Full House

The Sims 4 is starting to feel complete, so a Sims 5 announcement is probably coming.

If you had only started reading Generation XX in the last few months, you might be forgiven for thinking it's a column about indie game development and communities. Sometimes, it is, especially when I'm busy implementing programs for my interactive media students or making music for games. If you also read the indie pages, you'll know I review a wide range of things, but I haven't written about anything I'm playing just for fun in a while. This column was always, at least partly, intended to be a window into the content that consistently attracts this one, female player.

Firstly, I'd like to apologise for never having written about The Witcher 3. I've been playing it since release, but it is so massive. Golly, the moment I found out you could let out Geralt's hair was good, though. Similarly, boosting technology and civics in Civilization VI speaks so sweetly to my inner micromanager I should really pitch a James-O'Connor-Deus-Ex-length rolling feature on it.

But, no, I've returned to my comfort game this month. The Sims 4 may not have captured me as completely as its previous iterations, but my hankering does tend to coincide with expansion pack releases. This time, I found that toddlers had arrived (for free) as well as the City Living expansion pack. I often cram eight adults into homemade apartments on a standard lot, so hell yes, I'll buy it.

Making an adult and a toddler, then moving them into a small unit seemed like a useful way to explore new content. Immediately, I could see ways to plan for my intended playstyle. Even more difficult toddler traits, like Fussy, can be paired with Social and Family focused adults. One of the starter apartments even has buffs that boost school performance and ley lines to improve fertility. After a few days learning how to care for the first toddler, I got a passerby to knock up the mum and then there were three tiny children.

Also, because you pay a relatively small amount of ongoing rent, as opposed to building or buying a house, you can start with a glut of disposable cash, thus allowing for an easy stay at home parent/gardener/handyperson/cook. I still had five grand in the bank when the first of the three children celebrated his adult birthday and started using ridiculously overdeveloped skills to bring home the bacon. I've certainly played single Sims in starter houses who remain unemployed, but it's much harder, especially with three children.

> When love hearts started appearing in front of the door, I knew the deal

Now, in real life, I lived in an apartment for several years. So, in game, when love hearts started appearing in front of the neighbour's door, I knew the deal. Everyone is suddenly awake and watching TV, not willing to go back to bed and risk overhearing the romantic ruckus. Of course, if your kid needs to fill their energy bar before school, you can bang on the door, but who does that? I was slightly more inclined to intrude when the sim-neighbours argued loudly but, I dunno. I had real neighbours who used to throw glasses and plates. Police, maybe?

Probably, the developers intended that strong relationships would be forged by neighbourly proximity, but even playing the violin pisses everyone off, so I made friends elsewhere. My apartment was in the Spice Market, so you can play basketball, get food and browse flea markets without suffering loading screens and while retaining control of all of your Sims. It's not a seamless neighbourhood, but it helps. And, a keen eye can find you all sorts of one-of-a-kind lamps and unique cooking ingredients.

And speaking of food, toddlers no longer have to eat their trademark "bowl of mush." It's hard to overstate how helpful it is that they can simply climb in and out of bed by themselves, too. EA said that they were waiting until they could make these little people really good before they added them to the game and they have absolutely delivered detailed new ways to play that insert seamlessly, and significantly enrich existing content.

On this sojourn back to The Sims, I most enjoyed firming up an individual's progression through life from the outset. Being now nearly impossible to skill-max your toddler, prioritising movement, communication, thinking and imagination informs the resulting child's direction. Also, children can now develop their skills into the adult variants without having to wait. Combined with the ease of living in apartments, your Sims can do so much more in their lifetime. As for mine, I'll invariably play The Sims again when the seasons change, hopefully in game. PC

MEGHANN O'NEILL is inspired by how efficient it is to get sim-neighbours to help kids with their homework. In real life she lives next door to a retired teacher. Everything is falling into place.

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ROBOT JOCKS

WHO HUGH MONAHAN
WHERE STELLAR JOCKEYS
WHY BRIGADOR

With its Syndicate-like world, John Carpenter-like music, and old-school difficulty, Brigador is the greatest robot action game you've never heard of. We talk to Stellar Jockeys founder **HUGH MONAHAN** about his plans to re-launch one of the most tragically overlooked games of 2016...

Brigador has touched a nerve. With its cyberpunk aesthetic and difficult-yet-rewarding gameplay, this dark game of mercenary robot action has inspired a cult following. Created by Hugh and Jack Monahan, Brigador was directly inspired by Syndicate and Crusader: No Remorse. But something that surprised Hugh was the way it reminded fans of so many other '90s action games – the way it tapped into a zeitgeist.

"What's interesting is that a lot of the major touchstones for players are ones that we didn't even know about. Neither of us had ever actually played Desert Strike, or any of the Strike games. I'm sure I'd seen them, somewhere before, but it wasn't something I recalled. Future Cop LAPD is another one that comes up a lot. I never had a PlayStation. We weren't familiar with that game either. I knew about MechAssault, but I'd never played it."

It would seem that a lot of gamers' fondest memories are forged in games with high skill ceilings, where progress unlocks a greater breadth of possibilities, as opposed to just making things easier. "Look at XCOM versus Terror From the Deep. You look at Crusader: No Remorse versus Crusader: No Regret. The American Revolt, the expansion for Syndicate. They basically took the groundwork that the game laid, and just gave you access to more material, but continued the skill trend required in order to engage with that content.

"We weren't actively trying to be old-school about it. Or retro. Neither in appearance nor design, oddly enough. It just so happens that the way that we went about building the game harkens back to stuff that tends to be associated with '90s isometric-style games. The pre-rendered art style... we went with that because it's what allowed us to produce the tremendous amount of art with only one artist.

"On the gameplay side, it just came down to: We don't want to waste people's time. I want a game that you can get straight in to. There's going to be a learning curve; part of that is the control scheme, and part of that is the difficulty. But it shouldn't take two hours of playing the game in order to even be able to do everything that the game has to offer. If you're good, then you can just jump straight in. That's something that I think hasn't been too common lately."

Brigador was the manifestation of a singular vision, passionately pursued; yet it sold poorly. To perform something of a post-mortem on its launch, we asked Hugh about his initial marketing strategy. "I think implying there was an explicit strategy behind it is a little generous [*laughs*]." He pointed out that a major hurdle was that Brigador defied being pigeon-holed into a catchy elevator pitch. "People need these sort of pithy, very succinct descriptions or statements about your game to easily process what it is. If you can't summarise your game in one sentence... [*laughs*] We never really figured out a good way of doing it. The best shorthand we ever came up with was a Kool-Aid Man Simulator. [*laughs*] Which gets to the spirit of it, but isn't actually super-descriptive for the game itself."

> "a major hurdle was that Birgador defied being pigeon-holed into a catchy elevator pitch"

Hugh believes that this necessity sparked the widespread practice of describing games as being 'Souls-like.' "A lot of these games lately have been just re-imaginings of older franchises. You look at Stardew Valley, which is like Harvest Moon. These easy reference points. For us, the only obvious touchstone was actually a game called Bedlam, which is this ancient, ancient PC game. Again, one we didn't even know about until after early access. The point is that if you want to market your game well, you need to be able to condense it down into a neat statement. And we were never able to do that with Brigador.

"We toured the game a lot. But we were on the tail end of the growth curve for new games getting released on Steam. If Brigador had come out in 2014 I think this might've been a very different ball game. It's tricky. There's so much involved in launching a game. I think you have to be very careful. Or be very ready to commit some serious resources, if you are not already connected into the industry. Because there's such a volume of games coming out now that it's very hard to vie for attention. The signal to noise ratio is insane."

For the soundtrack Hugh wanted a suite of John Carpenter-style synth tunes, and a chance encounter at GDC led him to hiring the ace synthwave composer Makeup And Vanity Set. "It was a dream to work with him. We just handed him our design documents and he just made music for a couple years. That was it. Our only direction was just: 'More.'

"He's actually the reason we doubled down. The original soundtrack was only going to be an hour, an hour and 15 minutes of music. But his stuff was so good. By the end we launched with two and a half hours of music in the game. And then to boot he ended up releasing another EP of another 20 minutes of music on top of that. It's a prodigious amount of content. And we ended up using that music as a backing for the audio book as well, which [laughs] has a whole other story."

The visual and aural aesthetic of Brigador was heavily influenced by Alien, and by early

John Carpenter films, particularly Assault on Precinct 13 and Escape From New York. "This kind of chunky, '80s vision of the future is one that we just find very appealing."

While an American production, Brigador had a lot of subtle British influences. "Brad Buckmaster who helped us with a lot of our writing, he's a technical consultant for us for military stuff, and he also wrote the Brigador book. He's a tremendous fan of 2000AD. Judge Dredd came up often in our conversations. And also, we're all huge fans of Blackadder as well. So it was a natural fit.

"There's a show, That Mitchell & Webb Look. They've got a skit about SS officers realising that they're the bad guys. [Mid-Western US impression of a British accent] 'Have you looked at our caps recently? They've got skulls on them!' That skit perfectly encapsulates for me part of what we wanted to do with Brigador. Which is that you're the bad guy! And we're not going to explicitly tell you you're the bad guy. But if you pay attention at all, in the game, it's going to be very obvious. The very first mission in the game is you assassinating an unarmed person trapped at the end of a traffic tunnel. And then this demonic robot talks to you and says: 'Welcome Brigador.' Very ominous."

Snake Plissken's wry attitude was another influence on the overall tone. "I think not taking yourself too seriously, especially if you're making a kind of dark, violent world, can benefit you greatly. We didn't want to turn Brigador into some sort of morality play. We just sprinkle breadcrumbs throughout the game, these very odd elements, and they're there for you to engage with. If you want to read into it, you can. And if not you can still just enjoy the game and not have to think about it."

Brigador may have bombed on release, but Hugh and his team are not giving up. "We're re-launching the game on the one year anniversary. Beginning of June 2017. We are basically just re-releasing Brigador. There's a lot of things that I wasn't happy about, on the launch. There's an aphorism with regards to art: 'Art is never finished, it's just abandoned.' The same thing can be said for games. From a content standpoint, we've already released several new missions, new playable vehicles, added some extra writing." The re-release will include a lot of new content on top of an improved tutorial campaign. "New levels. New vehicles. Some fun stuff for the guys that have stuck with us, the guys who were day one purchasers, there's still plenty for them to come back to."

As an example the type of content fans can look forward to, Hugh cited the addition of the Varlet – a tiny three-wheeled scooter that's wonky, vulnerable, and has the two weakest guns in the game.

"We added it basically as a joke. It was one of those throwing-the-gauntlet moments as a developer to your audience, and people took to it like a fish to water. There's a bunch of videos on YouTube of these guys doing runs of the game in the most challenging vehicle, on the hardest difficulty. And just doing it with aplomb.

"From a developer standpoint, there are few pleasures greater than seeing someone so thoroughly understand what you've produced that they can operate at that level of mastery. It's become it's own sub-genre within the game. It's something that was embraced by our community in a way that I couldn't have hoped for."

For more details, visit StellarJockeys.com.

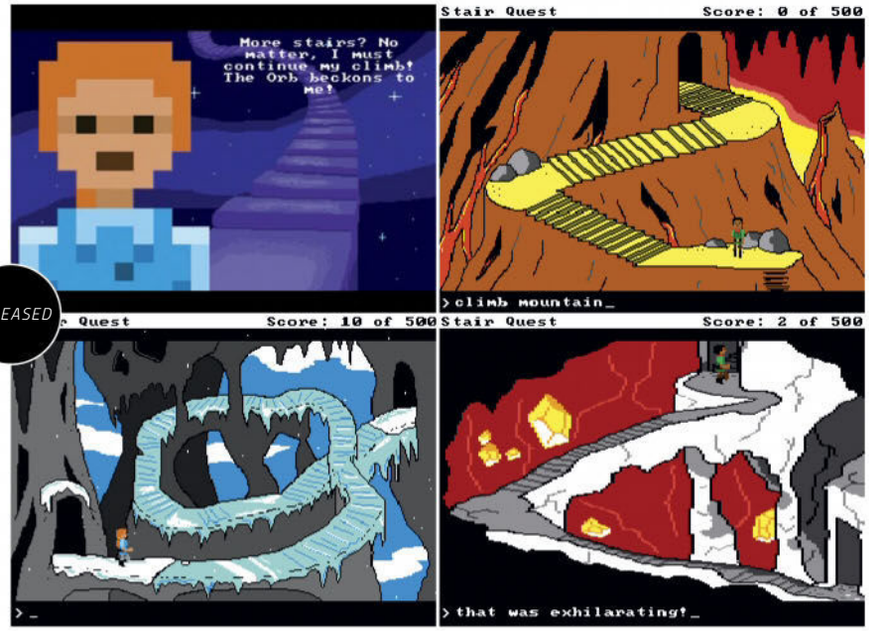
JAMES COTTEE PC

A Collection Aside

Stair Quest happened this month, completely by accident, and it was amazing. **MEGHANN O'NEILL** considered dedicating the entire indie section to it, but showed remarkable restraint. Other games might feature lovely artwork, cute political commentary and unique narrative structure, but they do have a disappointing lack of stairs. I suppose you can't really climb stairs at sea or on strategic maps. I mean, the other games are still good, but you know.

STAIR QUEST

DEVELOPER NO MORE FOR TODAY
PRICE FREE
decafjedi.itch.io/stair-quest


More stairs? No matter, I must continue my climb! The Orb beckons to me!
Stair Quest
Score: 0 of 500
> climb mountain_
Score: 10 of 500
> _
Stair Quest
Score: 2 of 500
> that was exhilarating!_

RELEASED

This is a free game, so I'm going to give you a full spoiler review. Why? I want to talk about it alongside you playing it. So, if you're over the age of 35, get it now, then read on. Younger people, I seriously don't know if you'd even slightly grok Stair Quest but, hey, stick around and delve into the weirdest nostalgic experience I've found in ages. Come to appreciate the ridiculousness of videogame staircases of the 1980s. If you're the kind of person who doesn't believe a videogame could move you to tears, I may have found the one to do it for you.

No, seriously. I'm sure I've told you my story about successfully navigating the poisoned brambles in King's Quest 2, restoring instead of saving and then crying until my dad got out of bed and redid it for me. Over Twitter, one Stair Quest designer told me the roots maze in Space Quest 2 saw him crying himself to sleep. Further, on the game's itch.io page you'll find the harrowing story of a player's older brother once demanding to complete a difficult staircase, dying and having his floppy disk subsequently cut into 8 pieces as revenge. Brutal times, the '80s.

Inside the PDF manual, you'll find a story so familiar you won't bother to read it; prince or princess goes to find the Orb of the Stars to unblight the realm. It is then suggested that you draw a map (for the linear journey through 10 screens), use items unless they're drugs and be careful making souffle. Among the listed verbs, which you can almost exclusively only use on stairs, are "seduce" and "sniff." I don't remember "hashtag" being a verb in 1985, and I'm not entirely sure it is now either, but it yields amusing results nonetheless.

So, yes. Stairs. You're climbing and/or interacting with them. It's incredible how quickly that perfect one-pixel moving double tap on an arrow key comes back, like muscle memory. A millisecond too long between taps and you're falling, too short and you shuffle pointlessly on the spot. I played this on hard mode; on my laptop which doesn't have diagonal arrow keys. They're risky, but so useful. Oh, and wow, if you think you save obsessively in 2017, I counted how many times I saved as I played this actually fairly short game. 183 times. It seemed necessary.

> "among the listed verbs, which you can only use on stairs, are "seduce" and "sniff""

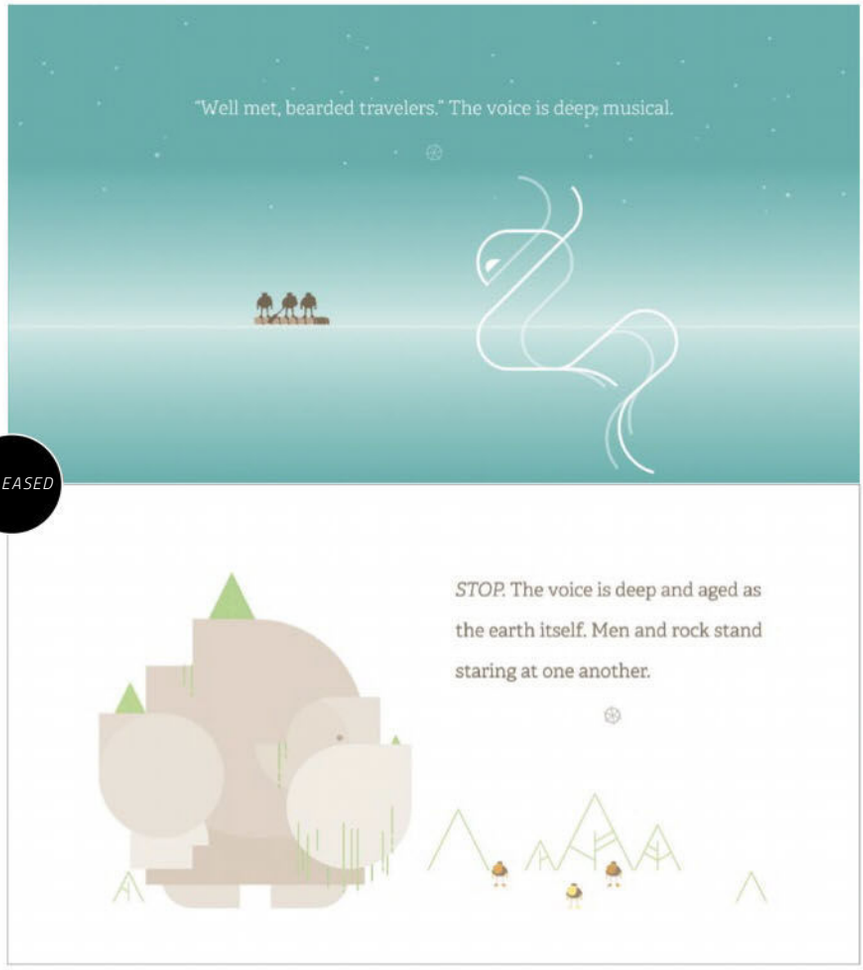
But let me tell you more about what makes a great EGA-era stair climbing game. Firstly, it needs to look like the stairs touch the wall so that you think you're safe when you travel up against what is actually nothingness. Also, a doorway that opens onto a one-pixel wide horizontal path is ripe for the walking downwards and dying. There has to be a nice mix of winding, artfully drawn tunnels where you can't see the path, contrasting with angular, but tiny, sections of staircase. And a sudden, descending sound effect when you die that scares the hell out of you every time.

Incidentally, the music, which is described as, "an 8-bit soundtrack so good it could pass as a 9-bit soundtrack," somehow perfectly evokes each location with little more than a melody, syncopated texture and drum parts that sound like the composer created samples inspired by his amateur beatboxing. Even the studio's name, No More for Today, which you see every time you die is reminiscent of the nagging '80s parent, terrified computers were turning their darling into a nerd. Guess what, Mum? They did.

I want to know what the speedrun record for Stair Quest is. Also if anyone has ever done it without dying. Out of a possible score of 500, I got 10. But I did climb all the stairs. Hahahahaha. The level of difficulty is maddening, faithful and, ultimately, achievable. At one point, I hopefully typed, "FLY." It didn't work. I wonder if the developers write congratulatory letters to people who finish the game. At any rate, the Special Edition is now also released with extended parser and more stairs. Yes, more stairs. Get climbing.

BURLY MEN AT SEA

DEVELOPER BRAIN & BRAIN
PRICE $10
burlymenatsea.com


"Well met, bearded travelers." The voice is deep, musical.
STOP. The voice is deep and aged as the earth itself. Men and rock stand staring at one another.

RELEASED

What are these circuitous fables? Did they all happen, or is the true version still somewhere within? Can three men really get swallowed by a whale and meet watery nymphs so often in one lifetime? Why are the stories sequential, yet similar, and always impossibly beautiful? In Burly Men at Sea, understanding the narrative structure informs play. I'll let you figure out how it works for yourself, but expect a collection of stories that happen individually and in turn, while also being more like variations on a theme than a genuine storybook collection.

Hasty, Steady and Brave Beard are fishermen who found a map in a bottle. Their personalities shape their dialogue and approach to adventure, leading to some hilarious interactions with weird creatures, as well as solutions to wonderful problems. I enjoyed reading every carefully placed word, while chuckling at the incongruousness of experienced seamen not removing their boots before going for a swim. Haven't they ever taken a lifesaving class? Of course, they also walk along the seabed and fly through the air on a "flower" at one point, so it's all good.

The interface is better suited for touchscreens than keyboard/mouse, with most interactions being a swipe or motion-based movement. I got stuck on an easy puzzle because I didn't realise I had to click and hold an object. There's not a lot to solve and this should be considered more of a tactile, narrative experience than something you really play. With gorgeous art, however, simply waiting for the next moment to happen can be really nice. You may spend half a minute descending to the ocean depths, but there are pretty things to look at and poke on the way down.

Indeed, I'm also impressed by the carefully crafted music. At one point, the brothers are swimming and the singer in the piece gargles the melody, like when you brush your teeth. I laughed for a very long time, then bought the soundtrack. Also, in the village, you'll find musical stems interacting in a way that's reminiscent of Monkey Island 2's Woodtick. As with the entire game, if you're looking for little details, especially in the many "new game plus" states, you'll be surprised, as well as delighted by things like the mouth noise sound effects.

Ultimately, I liked the idea of Burly Men at Sea's structure more than I liked playing it. It becomes repetitious and, even at the best of moments, you can feel like you're going around in circles. At the worst of times, you're accidentally and pointlessly repeating content. Regardless, it's a nicely-crafted, artistic experience and I'd recommend it to people who want to be inspired by lovely tales, beards and funny walks. It's the kind of game to settle in with for the evening, maybe near an open fire, to dry the day's inevitable dunking in the ocean.

POLITICAL ANIMALS

DEVELOPER SQUEAKY WHEEL
PRICE $15
www.politicalanimalsgame.com

Is it just me, or do you frequently fantasise about owning a lolly shop? You know the kind; all the sugary basics, colours of the rainbow and imported peculiarities. Would you try everything you sell, being the conscientious entrepreneur, or would the availability of so many delicious treats be more than one person could realistically appreciate? Political Animals is a cornucopia of, not sweets, but interesting stats, more than you can initially use or understand, for sure. I can eat an entire bag of Kool Mints in one sitting, but statistics are worth savouring.

Thankfully, this is a number crunch rather than a political statement because, when the game's artist sent me a code, I did not want to play an election game. But, it's light-hearted, silly and it definitely helps that the candidates are cutesy animals, with their abilities lightly reflecting their anthropomorphic qualities. As you spend a good several minutes on the character generation screen, tweaking everything from your chief political concerns to personal flaws, as well as for your staff, you'll quickly forget that elections actually matter in real life and just count bonuses.

In game, this sometimes makes play incongruous. I wanted to tell myself an emergent story, inventing a reason for it to be OK not to negotiate with a terrorist threatening to make a class of schoolchildren "disappear" because my approval in the relevant state was OK. But, that decision really shouldn't be a presidential candidate's, anyway. In another random event, a celebrity likes you and, regardless of whether you choose to date them, you get both an increase in reputation and scandal, in marginally different measure. That made me laugh.

On the island map, your employees have one move and one action per turn, which require more or less logistics points depending on local standing. You can certainly work efficiently, like using a rally to focus a state on an issue, then campaign directly, also factoring in bonuses afforded by local patrons previously aligned or bought with gifts. Of course, results are proportional to how much money you spend, with a focus on fundraising being necessary for everything from paying employees to carefully placing bribes for enhanced reputation.

Scandals are created by a number of things, mostly your dodgy actions, but also by your opponent manufacturing them. When picking your team, lawyers are useful for "making scandals disappear" and a well placed journalist can highlight your opponent's dirty laundry. At the end of the game, your play is characterised as one of a few styles. Mine is always Utopian, just like my starting character in Ultima 4 was always a bard because I answered questions compassionately and unquestioningly. But, there are several legitimate ways to play.

If I have one criticism it's that the game seems initially quite difficult to understand. The tutorial is less an incremental journey and more a bunch of explanations that aren't incredibly exciting to read. How the undecided will vote on Election Day is particularly opaque, although I know it is based on a combination of factors you can access, and presumably try to influence, via an overlay. Of course, this does lend Election Day and the state-by-state round-up a certain nervous excitement that highlights your many flukes and mistakes.

Think of Political Animals as a numbers game that is complex enough to be better realised as a digital product, rather than a boardgame. With, of course, cute campaign dialogue like, "Better hippocampuses for everyone." Why does this game feature animal characters? Probably just for the play on words in the title, but it does build upon the theme relatively well. The plethora of statistics available to influence your playstyle will keep you coming back for more, in the face of both victory and humiliating defeat.

MILKMAID OF THE MILKY WAY

DEVELOPER MACHINEBOY
PRICE $8
machineboy.com/milkmaid

I'm sure I've mentioned that my husband's side of the family is Bulgarian. As such, my offspring engage in various traditions on New Year's Day, like wishing people's apple trees an abundance of red fruit, not green, and hoping they won't die during the following year. They also tap their Baba (grandma) with tinsel-covered sticks to exchange their youthfulness for her cash, usually a generous $20 each. Milkmaid of the Milky Way is an adventure game my kids really connected with and, if you play it, you'll come to appreciate that youth is something to keep for yourself.

The opening of the game is pastoral and lovely, like when you're feeding Hen Wen in The Black Cauldron, but peace is fleeting. You'll make the most delicious-sounding butter, have a brief, possibly suggestive, conversation with the guy who takes your wares to market and are then forced to board a bronze spacecraft in pursuit of your cows. I didn't really want to mention this, because aliens are always a nice surprise, but to cast this a dairy farming sim would be inaccurate. The bulk of the game happens after abduction.

This brings me to my only real criticism, which is that the artwork was so beautiful, gentle and green in the opening that I wanted to stay on the girl's solitary clifftop farm, perched above a fjord, for the entire game. The spaceship certainly has interesting features, but it is functionally drawn and garish, in places. It does, however, have around twenty rooms, people to talk to and puzzles to solve. My kids particularly liked a pair of old ladies who made jokes about their droopy breasts. They've been copying the giggle animation ever since.

> "everything rhymes, and it lends the tale a folksy feel, even when you're orbiting the Earth"

Probably the most useful thing I can say about puzzling is that I played this with my kids over three nights and they spent the days bugging me with theories on how to use items. Can we throw a ball up the zero G elevator? Where can we find a ball? Will the cows be OK? Do the cows have a ball? This is the first time I remember this happening with my kids, although I certainly had this relationship with my dad for my entire childhood. Everything was solvable, but we sometimes needed some time away before the penny would drop.

RELEASED

After playing Stair Quest, I noticed how quickly this character moved. It may seem a strange observation, but it allowed us to quickly test puzzle theories, without feeling that tedious sense of "walking around." Amazingly, everything rhymes, sometimes not quite perfectly, but it lends the tale a folksy feel, even when you're orbiting the Earth. There's certainly a sense of ancientness to the inhabitants of the spaceship and their way of life combines technology, mysticism and pastoralism. Things have just gone a bit wrong for them, that's all.

Milkmaid of the Milky Way is probably three hours long, being nicely paced for a play with the family. It combines weightier themes with light-hearted banter and the puzzles make plenty of sense. Delivering precisely what is expected from a classic point and click adventure, I also got a nostalgic feeling of shared experience with my kids. Of course, I wouldn't try to re-live my childhood through them. Or would I? My childhood was full of games. And staircases. I wonder if I can get them to hit me with the tinsel stick next year. PC

10 to Watch

Gloria Victis

DEVELOPER BLACK EYE
PUBLISHER BLACK EYE
DUE 2017 (IN EARLY ACCESS)
gloriavictisgame.com

1

▼ A low fantasy medieval sandbox MMO, Gloria Victis is shaping up to be quite special. Devoid of a typical class structure, players in Gloria Victis are free to develop their characters to suit their play style, whether it be crafting arms and armour for other players, building castles, or fighting on the frontlines in PvP/PvE sieges and raids. Although there are some fantasy elements in the game world, the overall theme is one of grim and gritty brutality.

SpellForce 3

DEVELOPER GRIMLORE GAMES
PUBLISHER NORDIC GAMES
DUE 2017
grimloregames.com

▲ Development of SpellForce 3, a hybrid RPG/Strategy game is being headed up by a new studio, so it's only fitting that the story isn't continuing the narrative from the first two games. Instead, SpellForce 3 will serve as a prequel to the series, with players fighting, recruiting and levelling their characters in a vast unified continent yet to be riven by the forces of magic.

2

3

FlatOut 4: Total Insanity

DEVELOPER KYLOTONN
PUBLISHER STRATEGY FIRST
DUE MARCH 31, 2017
strategyfirst.com/flatout

After the critically panned third iteration of FlatOut, new developer Kylotonn has taken over developer duties. Apparently the game is very strongly based around notes and suggestions put forward by the community. In addition to the series staple smash-em-up races, FlatOut 4 will also feature environmental destruction, potentially making for even more spectacular crashes.

4

Soviet City

DEVELOPER CHICKEN IN THE CORN
PUBLISHER CHICKEN IN THE CORN
DUE 2017
facebook.com/ChickenInTheCorn

Do you like your city building games dark and totalitarian? Well, we have good news for you – Soviet City is definitely your kind of game. You are a mayor in a Soviet city. Not only are you responsible for maintaining infrastructure and building new developments for the city, you also have to keep the populace in line through a variety of means, always being careful not to push too far and risk open rebellion.

5

RimWorld

DEVELOPER LUDEON STUDIOS
PUBLISHER LUDEON STUDIOS
DUE TBA (IN ALPHA)
rimworldgame.com

Imagine the ASCII insanity (and depth) of Dwarf Fortress, but give it a simple but attractive GUI and set it in space and you have some of an idea what to expect from RimWorld. Three survivors from a crash on a planet at the rim of the known universe and must build a colony and survive. Opposing them are the elements, the biome in which they are situated, the personalities of the survivors and a game AI that will pose threats based on what the players are doing.

Space Engineers

DEVELOPER KEEN SOFTWARE HOUSE
PUBLISHER KEEN SOFTWARE HOUSE
DUE TBA
spaceengineersgame.com

6

■ Based around NASA forecasts of the kinds of conditions space colonists might face, Space Engineers puts players in the work boots of space engineers, tasked with gathering resources, building bases, spaceships and machines, and generally ensuring the survival of the colony. The game will feature both a survival and creative mode, so you can either work against the elements, or against your own imagination. Sounds good to us.

No Truce with the Furies

DEVELOPER ZA/UM STUDIO
PUBLISHER FORTRESS OCCIDENT
DUE 2017
devblog.fortressoccident.com

9

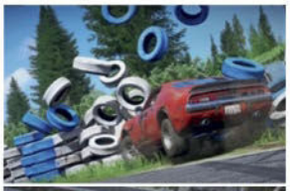
▼ An Estonian developed police procedural RPG set in a "fantastic realism" world on the verge of the apocalypse, No Truce with the Furies has us very excited for a number of reasons, not the least of them being that the two main inspirations for the game seem to be Planescape: Torment and Kentucky Route Zero. The fact that the only combat that happens in the game is resolved through dialogue also really whets the roleplaying appetite.

Wreckfest

DEVELOPER BUGBEAR ENTERTAINMENT
PUBLISHER BUGBEAR ENTERTAINMENT
DUE TBA (EARLY ACCESS)
wreckfestgame.com

10

■ Instead of developing the next iteration of FlatOut, Finnish developer Bugbear Games, the original creators of FlatOut are instead working on a new demolition racing game called Wreckfest. Unlike FlatOut, Wreckfest is all about trying to get the fastest lap times while trying to ram your opposition off the road or otherwise cause spectacular wrecks. There might be some sarcasm in the last sentence.



ABSOLVER

A beautifully presented brawler with depth

DEVELOPER SLOCLAP
PUBLISHER DEVOLVER DIGITAL
DUE 2017
www.absolver.com

While we only played 1v1, Absolver promises to support bouts up to 3v3.

While Ubisoft Montreal's For Honor may have proved divisive in terms of its use of microtransactions and peer-to-peer networking, what it executed beautifully was a rewarding combat system that was, on the surface, easy to learn but, ultimately, tricky to master.

New indie developer Sloclap (founded very recently in 2015) is comprised of ex-Ubisoft Montreal devs who met while working on the Ghost Recon and Watch Dogs games. Sloclap's inaugural game is Absolver, and after going hands-on with it, I'm not surprised it's been receiving positive buzz and pre-release awards.

Absolver is a combat RPG that slaps you on the wrists for button mashing and rewards you for fantastic timing, which is absolutely the way it should be.

On the timing front, it has a Gears of War-like meter that appears on screen while you're attacking. Unlike Gears, there's no leeway for okay timing, with a tiny and unforgiving meter that scoffs you harder than Pai Mei for less-than-perfect timing and ruins your combo. In truth, watching the meter for guidance was distracting, but I was told that perfect timing equates to pressing an attack button as the previous hit lands on your opponent, so I stuck with that and got a lot better with my combo timing.

To add to the depth of Absolver's melee combat system, striking puts your character in one of four stances. These positions impact the kind of attack combos you can access on top of the deceptively straightforward options of attacks, dodges, feints and counters.

That RPG element comes in to play for gameplay in terms of customising your Combat Deck. This applies to fighting styles, weapons and abilities, and combo attack sequences. Along with some (initially) minor customisation options, you get to select your first fighting style from the outset. For instance, the style I selected allowed me to parry incoming attacks.

> "wastes little time before you're engaging in fights that will punish you if you try to mash"

This was by no means an automated ability, as I learnt the hard foot-to-the-face way. The parry is a high-risk/high-reward manoeuvre that requires both timing and placement. First, you must determine which side the next attack is coming from. Then you have to perfectly time a press of the right controller stick in the correct direction just as the hit lands to counter it. If you nail it, the striking opponent is temporarily stunned. If you mess it up, as I did on more than one occasion, you're basically opening yourself up to a combo.

Even though I was playing on PC, Absolver seems to be the kind of game that's best played with a controller. That said, I thought the same thing would apply with For Honor, but found its keyboard/mouse controls worked for me on release. It's unclear at this stage whether the same will be true of Absolver.

After the obligatory start-of-game customisation, my Absolver demo started with a tutorial to teach me the basics. I tend to try to rush through these things, but that was a mistake in Absolver. It's not your typical hand-holding tutorial that teaches new players familiar tricks. In fact, Absolver wastes little time getting the bare basic controls out of the way, before you're engaging in fights that will punish you if you try to mash your way through them.

Patience is a fantastic player trait in Absolver, whether it comes to mastering that perfect combo timing or, in the case of my primary stance, waiting for the perfect moment to parry and spin an incoming assault on its head. During training, there's also a smattering of the storytelling and worldbuilding for which Sloclap is gunning.

Absolver's melee-fighting gameplay plays out in a world that's not quite as bizarre as first-person fighting series Zeno Clash, but definitely has an otherworldly feel to it. From what little I experienced, it's clear that Sloclap is trying to push the narrative angle, too.

Help your opponent to his feet to accrue Gentleman Points. (That's a lie.)

Every player starts out as a masked character called a Prospect. That mask is created by the rulers of the land, the Guides, who want to test your mettle to see if you're worthy of being part of a group of peacekeepers called the Absolvers. There's also the promise of a rich history in the game world, what with a power struggle over the fallen Adal Empire in which the game takes place. During your travels, players will reportedly run into other Prospects (players) in seamless encounters that promise to be quite tense.

Interactions with other players could mean a fight, or it could mean trading items, or even training. The dev who guided me through my play session mentioned that other players can become mentors or disciples, and players with other fighting styles can teach you unlearnt styles (which you keep) during such encounters.

Tapping back into that worldbuilding and storytelling, Absolver has player-versus-environment (PvE) dungeons that can be played cooperatively. As far as I can tell, these will be exclusively relegated to the underground mine areas of Adal, but what I know for sure is playing through them comes with the tantalising prospect of rare loot and equipment. If the initial difficulty of Absolver is anything to go by, you can expect "rare" to equate to "expect to have to fight through hell to get it".

Absolver also has a player-versus-player (PvP) component, which is where I spent the bulk of my hands-on time. I only had a chance to try the 1v1 variant, but the final game will also include up to 3v3 modes.

After what I experienced of Absolver's competitive multiplayer, the 3v3 mode could prove to be a lot of fun, especially with the added tension of the eventuality of 3v2 and 3v1 fights. They could descend into a one-sided group-bashing, but assuming that Sloclap has tuned the blocking and parrying system to account for multiple attackers, it could also make for some memorable YouTube-worthy clutch wins.

As it turned out, my 1v1 throwdowns were one-sided and, except for the odd round here or there (it was a first-to-three fight), exclusively in my favour. That's not to say my opponent was a pushover. The more we fought, the more we became wary of the other's fighting advantages, and attempted to exploit weaknesses.

Initially, as is my approach to most action games (melee

DECK THE HALLS

Slowclap promises a lot of depth in the personalisation potential of Absolver's Combat Deck. Because of the four stances, where you land after each hit determines what combo hit comes next. So performing a certain part of a combo may land you in a stance that locks off, say, a punch, but lets you use a powerful spin kick.

or otherwise), I went in feet and fists blazing. The ultra-aggressive approach worked well for a couple of rounds, but then my opponent was on to my one-trick tactic. As he blocked and evaded my flurry of punches and kicks, my stamina was quickly exhausting, and I was the one on the backfoot.

Health and power-ups carry over between rounds, as we both quickly learnt, which meant that a second or third-round fight could quickly turn into an easy victory for the recently defeated. The better you fight, the faster you access some of the special abilities, too. From what I experienced of these abilities, they weren't mightily imbalanced superpowers, either.

> "if you're hit while wielding a weapon, you drop it, which gives your opponent an opportunity to use it against you"

Instead, the three abilities we both had access to were more on the practical side rather than destroyers of balance. There was an ability that replenished health, an addition that's as obvious as it is essential for victors of hard-fought rounds. It doesn't work instantaneously, either, meaning you must make enough space between you and your aggressor to activate it (or you can do it safely at the end of a victorious round or start of a new one).

Initially, popping the health ability mid-fight was as simple as retreating a couple of steps and activating it, but in later fights those retreating steps flagged what was about to happen. A couple of times, I managed to land some free hits as my opponent was stuck in the frozen healing state. He didn't end up getting his health back, and I scored an easy combo.

This clever risk/reward logic carried over to the weapon system, too. I'd chosen a one-handed sword, but while it appeared to dish out more damage with each hit, it also appeared to use more stamina. On top of this, if you're hit while wielding a weapon, you drop it, which gives your opponent an opportunity to pick it up and use it against you.

The other ability we got to play with was a ground-pound stun, which my opponent put to better use than I did. During our later throwdowns, my aggressive openers were easily turned against me with that stun ability. When I got too close, he stunned, and followed it up with a flurry of easy hits. I never managed to use it successfully, but also figured it wasn't worth activating because you can only use one ability at a time before having to earn access to them again.

Sacrificing additional health in a round or the option to use a longer-range weapon didn't make sense for the chance to stun an opponent. Besides, by the end of our brawl, I was starting to get the hang of my fighting style's unique parry ability, and that had my opponent within striking distance every time.

The only concern I have for Absolver at this stage is whether the combo customisation will hamper players' ability to learn the nuances of each style so they can feel they have a fighting chance. Outside of this, Absolver is shaping up to be a glorious contender for fighting fans, and one that, if Sloclap gets the balancing right, could prove to be an underground hit. *NATHAN LAWRENCE* PC

COMBAT CONTEXT

According to the story, that mysterious mask every player awakes in means the player character doesn't need to eat, drink, and is somewhat immune to death. This is a fancy way of narratively justifying respawns. If Sloclap is keen to justify all of this from the outset, expect plenty of narrative titbits in Absolver's world.

RUINER

A sci-fi sociopath crusader with no remorse and no regrets

DEVELOPER REIKON GAMES
PUBLISHER DEVOLVER DIGITAL
DUE 2017
www.ruinergame.com

Before I started playing Ruiner, I was told that developer Reikon Games had tweaked the difficulty to make it a bit easier on the player. So, when I tell you that there are points during Ruiner's tutorial that will kick your arse, you'll know how punishing this isometric action game really is.

Ruiner is like the Crusader (of the No Remorse and No Regret varieties) games of old have been thrown into a screaming blender with a healthy serving of Hotline Miami's brutality and a smattering of the Dark Souls series' unforgiving 'death is the best teacher' approach to design.

In terms of its look and feel, it's more Blade Runner than any of those game examples, with cult cyberpunk anime cited as the spiritual influence. You play as an unnamed Daft Punk reject whose internet-connected mask reads like the kind of tweets that are sent to game developers when highly anticipated titles are delayed.

The tutorial is quite methodical, taking its time to teach you the core mechanics and reiterating the harsh reality that standing still is a death sentence. Ruiner is a high-lethality game where that reality cuts both ways. Enemies that wield metal pipes, bladed weapons and sharp sticks swarm you, and it doesn't take many hits for you to visit (or revisit) that respawn screen.

Throw some ranged weapons into the mix and Ruiner is positively punishing, especially considering our antihero starts with a metal pipe and seemingly has to collect all other weapons (including the all-important ranged ones). The playable character has some nifty tricks up his wired sleeves to help combat this punishment, though.

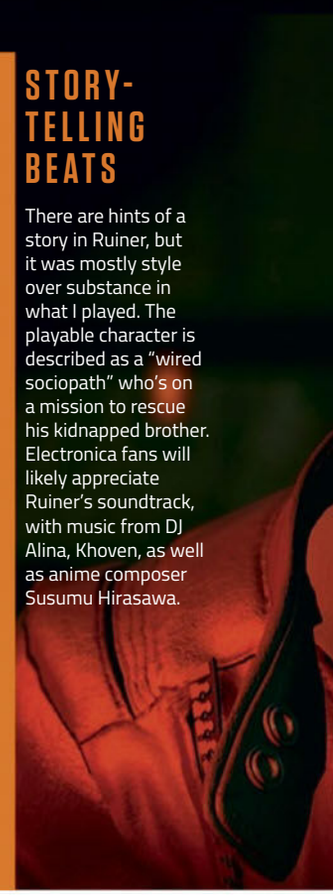
There's a forward-facing energy shield that blocks incoming fire and can be used to bash enemies to the ground when combined with the dash ability. That shield doesn't last long, though, and alongside health, appears to be only rechargeable on fixed energy pads (and separate health pads for staying alive). Those pads don't hold unlimited energy or health, either, so your best hope for survival in Ruiner is to master hit-and-dash techniques that leave you unscathed.

You have to dash to avoid swarming enemies. It's also handy for giving you some breathing space, dodging deadly floating mines that chase you before detonating, and avoiding environmental hazards that'd otherwise leave you gibbed. You can tap the key for an instant teleportation, or you can hold it to slow time and grab some (likely) well-needed breathing space.

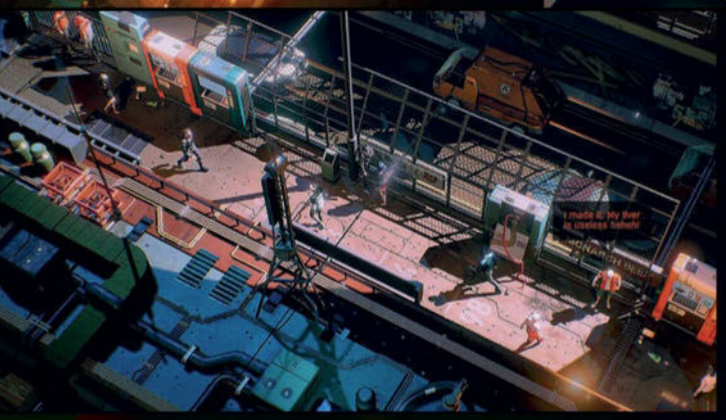
For purists who'd prefer to keep the challenge insanely high and everything in real-time, treat this feature as supplementary. For everyone else, it'll likely feel essential for stopping yet another visit to the respawn screen. In fairness, despite Ruiner's punishing difficulty, Reikon did seem to be generous with the checkpoints, so I never felt like dying was overly frustrating. Still, there's always the chance that could change

STORY-TELLING BEATS

There are hints of a story in Ruiner, but it was mostly style over substance in what I played. The playable character is described as a "wired sociopath" who's on a mission to rescue his kidnapped brother. Electronica fans will likely appreciate Ruiner's soundtrack, with music from DJ Alina, Khoven, as well as anime composer Susumu Hirasawa.



Hang on, just picking up some new threads before a killing spree.



> the tactical possibilities can feel overwhelming when the screen is filled with blood-thirsty foes

for the final game, or possibly higher difficulty levels.

The neat thing about the time-slowing dash option is it works offensively and defensively. That's true of the real-time version, too, but buying a second or two to plan a multi-path teleport where you can bludgeon enemies at the teleportation points before moving on is as satisfying as it is tactical. Alternatively, as is highlighted in the tutorial, as armed goons swarm into a room, you can use it to teleport to a conveniently placed machine gun, then teleport back to some partial cover.

Then there's the armed fiends to take into account. Pistols aren't so bad, because their shots are relatively easy to avoid. But machine guns and shotguns are positively brutal. It's not so much that the on-screen madness is hard to track in Ruiner, it's just that the tactical possibilities can feel overwhelming when the screen is filled with blood-thirsty foes.

Teleporting behind a box might buy you a second or force flanking foes to split up, but there's a cooldown on the dash, and there's the feeling that the shield should be saved for ballistic baddies. The good news is that caving in the skull of a firearm-wielding grunt makes them drop their weapon. Ammunition doesn't last for too long, though, and you end up playing it Last of Mohicans, emptying one weapon before hastily snatching up the next.

Those same ballistic bastards become your best friends when the shoe is on the other foot: shotguns shred (especially ones with fiery Dragon's breath-like rounds) and fully automatic weapons mince. I get the impression they're in short supply for Ruiner's boss fights, though. One such fight puts you up against a similarly powered katana-wielding boss who has an intimidatingly long health bar and intermittently leaves the fight to carpet bomb the arena you're trapped in.

Sure, you receive timely health drops at certain points during that fight, but you need to have that hit-and-dash trick down pat if you want a hope in hell of defeating him. I was originally handed a controller for my demo, but Ruiner really does seem better suited to keyboard/mouse controls.

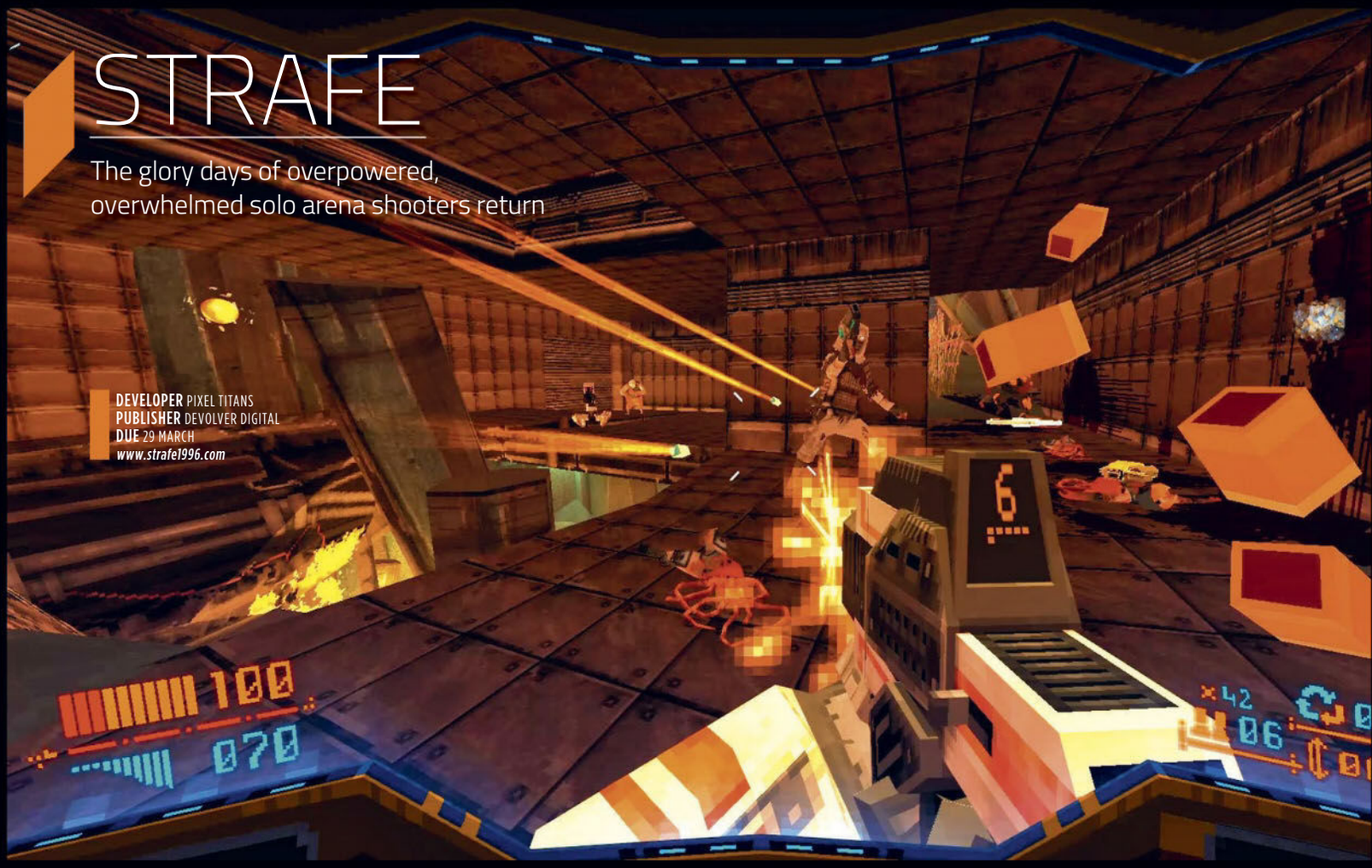
The limited ammunition coupled with the time-slowing (note: not time-freezing) dash ability pretty much necessitates the need for the precision of a mouse, both for ballistic accuracy and placing pinpoint teleportation waypoints. Even then, your eyes will likely be bouncing between nearby cover, incoming enemies, and the cooldown of your dash ability as you make on-the-spot combat decisions.

As someone who avoided the masochistic Dark Souls series, I was genuinely surprised that Ruiner's often punishing difficulty didn't deter me from coming back for more. The sci-fi setting and contemporary isometric gameplay complement the sense of on-the-fly decision-making that slaps you when you get it wrong, but feels oh so good when a plan comes together.

NATHAN LAWRENCE PC

STRAFE

The glory days of overpowered, overwhelmed solo arena shooters return



DEVELOPER PIXEL TITANS
PUBLISHER DEVOLVER DIGITAL
DUE 29 MARCH
www.strafe1996.com

Strafe is the original Quake but with randomly generated levels. The end. Oh, you want more? Okay. It's a breakneck-pace arena shooter, albeit with some modern touches that help to separate it from being a mere Quake clone.

The randomly generated levels is one of those contemporary additions. Every time you die the level changes in terms of its enemies, monster closets, rooms, power-ups and even its secrets. In gameplay terms, navigating the randomly generated levels mostly descends into jumping backwards while firing, circle-strafing, and generally ignoring the modern shooter philosophies that try to keep you shooting with your feet on the ground.

Forget about running and jumping impacting your accuracy, everything about Strafe is designed to keep you on the move as you dish out the pain. Strafe is no PC-destroying Crysis equivalent, given its deliberate fresh-out-of-the-'90s aesthetic, but the so-called Uber-Gore Tech is more than just a cheap attempt at making things bloody. It actually helps with the pathfinding.

Given the rooms constantly change, the fact you can splatter the floors, walls and ceilings with persistent blood actually helps as a guide when you get lost in the rocket-jumping mayhem. Because of course there's rocket-jumping in Strafe: it wouldn't be much of a Quake clone if it didn't have that.

Despite the clear tongue-in-cheek ridiculousness of Strafe, Pixel Titans gets that the weapons have to feel great, and they do. One of the neatest novel mechanics is how Strafe treats empty weapons. Certain ones can be thrown once empty, for a last-ditched effort at killing one more enemy, but my favourite was how an empty rocket launcher can be swung like a baseball bat.

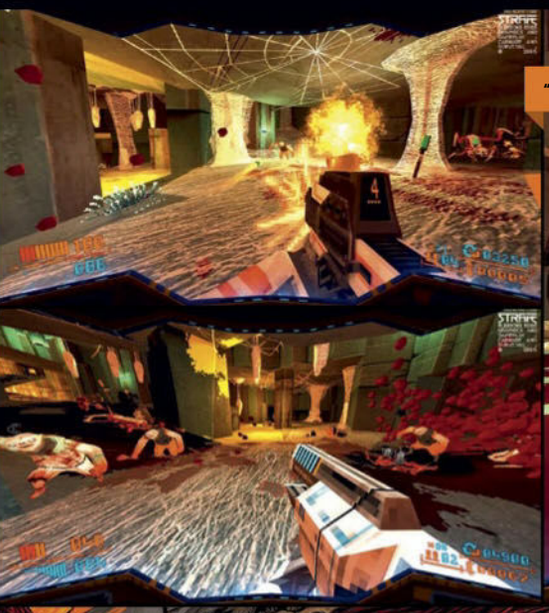
> "the fact you can splatter the walls and ceilings with persistent blood helps as a guide"

This is, of course, not ideal in a game that sends mindless enemies at you in waves. When you start each level, you get to pick one weapon to roll with, though you may find others along the way. There's also the promise of weapon vendors hidden in the maps, too. The shotgun is meant for up-close death-dealing, the machine gun for mid-range engagements, and the railgun for fans of longer-range sniping.

These weapons can be upgraded, and sometimes in surprising ways. The machine gun, for instance, can be upgraded to have horizontal recoil, so the more you spray, the wider the recoil, and the more charging grunts you can shoot in the face

OLD-SCHOOL SECRETS

If you had the pleasure of playing the original Wolfenstein, Doom or Quake, you know how to search for secrets in Strafe. Any blocky surface that looks slightly different from the other deliberately drab textures is a sure sign of a secret. That, or just mash the 'use' button as you sprint along walls.



"Clean up on aisle 6!"

Not to be confused with Strife, an FPS/RPG that actually came out in 1996.

simultaneously. On top of this, there are cluster bombs, gas grenades, trip mines, and the kind of upgrades you'd expect from a title that's emulating the era that saw the creation of some of gaming's greatest weapons.

On-the-fly tactics are rewarded and playing to the strengths of your chosen weapon's primary and secondary abilities is a must if you don't want to respawn and replay a randomised level. Fans of arena shooters should be heartened to hear that there's a smattering of high-skill-ceiling guns, but the eight alternative builds per gun include something for all skill levels.

In a year that will likely see the release of the next evolution of arena shooters (Quake Champions and LawBreakers, specifically), it's refreshing to see that Pixel Titans can embrace the core pillars of the old-school FPS subgenre while adding small modern touches that have big gameplay implications. Strafe is fast, furious and heaps of fun.

NATHAN LAWRENCE PC

SUNLESS SKIES

Night of the tentacle

DEVELOPER FAILBETTER GAMES
PUBLISHER FAILBETTER GAMES
DUE 2018
www.failbettergames.com

The ocean, in the tradition of Lovecraft, is terrifying in its unknowability, its ineffable vastness. You honestly have no idea just how many tentacles lurk beneath that moon-dappled surface.

Fallen London and Sunless Sea, the literary giants upon whose shoulders Sunless Skies rests, drew upon the ocean for not merely their geographical setting but their mystery, their sprawling possibilities. They were both remarkable works of interactive fiction, particularly Sunless Sea, which unmoored players from a traditionally linear story and let them chart a personalised course through an archipelago of narrative moments, choices and consequences. The Unterzee (the titular Sunless Sea created when London quite literally fell) wasn't an ocean exactly; it wasn't quite that big. But it was large enough to get lost in, to make you feel anxious when you ventured too far from port, and to hold a considerable number of tentacles.

Space, then, is rather like the sea. It's vast and sprawling--in fact, it's really quite large--and is dotted with planets and asteroids and the like in much the same way you find islands and other landmasses emerging from the sea. So when Queen Victoria decided, in the fantastical alternative history of the series, to expand the British Empire beyond the Unterzee she opted to travel to the stars. One can only assume she wanted to experience cosmic horror first-hand.

Sunless Skies, from the honestly named developer Failbetter Games, was just recently successfully crowdfunded, rocketing past its Kickstarter goal of £100,000 three times over. In reaching for the stars, it promises to let players apply the colonial principles of the actual British Empire and declare all of space *terra nullius*. According to Failbetter, this means "Stake your claim. Fight to survive. Speak to storms. Murder a sun. Face judgement." Which, as far as bullet point sales pitches go, starts out as you'd expect, takes a detour into the unusual and evocative, and finishes rather ominously.

Failbetter CEO and the game's art director, Paul Arendt, has a slightly different spin.

"Sunless Skies is a game of exploration and survival set in a Victorian nightmare vision of outer space," he says. "This isn't a void of emptiness that's dominated by cold physics and mathematics. This is a busy, fecund environment that's full of life, full of danger. It's an environment that fights back when you try and conquer it."

We wish more developers would describe their games as fecund.

But it makes sense. Sunless Skies *is* a game full of life. In Sunless Sea, when you died you could choose something to pass on to your next life, but essentially you were rerolling and starting afresh. In Sunless Skies, you don't merely inherit your previous captain's possessions; you inherit every choice and impact they've had on the world. Life carries on, from one generation to the next. I think I'll leave the tentacles for the grandkids to take care of. *DAVID WILDGOOSE* PC

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WARHAMMER 40K: INQUISITOR – MARTYR

In the dark future of the 41st millennium there is only early access

DEVELOPER NEOCORE GAMES
PUBLISHER NEOCORE GAMES
DUE TBA (EARLY ACCESS)
www.neocoregames.com

Neocore Games has a pretty great track record with indie ARPGs, with the silly but solid Incredible Adventures of Van Helsing series, and hopefully that experience will flow into Martyr. We say hopefully because at the current moment of early access, Martyr, despite having quite a wealth of content isn't really a game that should be available for purchase. The "Founding" has packages available for purchasing access to the alpha as well as exclusive package related content, for between $39.99 and $999.99, and for that money all players currently get is repetitive missions, a single class and frequent crashes. These problems are problems to be expected with an alpha, but most developers ensure more stability and playability in their early access titles.

One of the reasons the alpha is so rough might be the huge ambition the developers have for Martyr. Some of these ideas are already on show in what is available. Nearly every object in the environment is destructible and physics integrated, and blowing up the environment is a vital aspect of gameplay. Anything that can be hidden behind can be used as cover, with individual objects giving different levels of defence depending on their height, position and the material they are made of. Similarly the larger enemies players will encounter are destructible as well, with well placed shots being able to smash armour and remove limbs – blow off a gun arm and you'll have an easier fight, remove a leg and your target won't be able to evade.

No story or campaign mode is currently available in the alpha, but what we do know is that the game world is both huge and an open-ended sandbox. Players will travel from system to system in the Caligari sector of the Segmentum Tempestus, a remote region of Imperial space. The Caligari sector is old, cloaked in rumour and shadow, and plagued by Warpsurges, small, random Warpstorms. This makes the sector a prime breeding ground for heresy, and a staging ground for the minions of chaos. In other words, it's an ideal place for members of the inquisition to ply their bloody trade. Each system in the sector can have multiple inhabited planets and stations, and each of those can have multiple missions – slaying cultists, hunting

40K FOREVER

A lesser known mandate of the Inquisition is that every issue of a PC gaming magazine must now contain at least one Warhammer 40K game.

The annual Orks v Space Marines charity match was postponed due to a waterlogged pitch.

"this makes the sector a prime breeding ground for heresy, and a staging ground for the minions of chaos"

Step this way, sir, and martyr yourself on my power sword.

demons, purging chaos, fighting off an Ork invasion. Completing missions on a planet increases Inquisition influence on the planet and rewards the player with new equipment or money.

Equipment is a vital part of the game as character skills are tied to their gear. At the current stage of the alpha, only the Crusader class is available. This class is broken into three specialisations – melee, assault and heavy weapons. Each has a few set skills and then a set of skills associated with the currently equipped weapon. Each character can carry two weapon sets – a heavy bolter and a plasma cannon for example – and can swap between them as necessary. Rather than ammunition, weapons instead have cooldowns for anything other than standard attacks.

Warhammer 40,000: Inquisitor – Martyr is an ambitious game and one with a lot of potential. Fingers crossed that offering it for sale at such an early stage of development doesn't do more harm than good. *TAVISH FORREST* PC

LIGHTSPEED FRONTIER

A space modyssey

DEVELOPER RIVETED GAMES
PUBLISHER RIVETED GAMES
DUE EARLY ACCESS
www.lightspeedfrontier.com

We're kind of amazed that it has taken this long for a game like Lightspeed Frontier to enter the world. There have been games using a similar concept of creating and flying a spaceship before, with titles like Defect: Spaceship Destruction Kit, Kerbal Space Program and Captain Forever giving players the opportunity to build and fly their own spaceships, but each of those games, no matter how good, was limited in scope, constraining players to a single play style or objective. Lightspeed Frontier looks to expand on the idea by placing spaceship construction in a sandbox environment, essentially merging a liberal dose of Minecraft with a few shots of Elite.

Set in the farthest reaches of the universe, players take the role of an intrepid explorer and adventurer who has scrimped and saved to purchase a warp drive and a command pod – the control deck and cockpit that forms the basis of standardised spaceship design. In this future, space vehicle design has been standardised and made modular, so any part that you can find, purchase or blow off an enemy ship can be added to the angular body of your ship. Want a powerful laser? You could of course try buying one, but you could also head out to find a ship belonging to the technologically advanced United Research Alliance and blow them out of the air, scavenging the wreckage for parts. You start off with the smallest command pod only capable of hosting up to 20 modules, but players can eventually work their way up to the biggest class of ships in the universe, Dreadnauts.

If you prefer buying all your gear legally, you can always earn the credits required in a more respectable manner by trading goods between worlds and stations, mining or taking open ended missions that can actually influence the ebb and flow of the universe. It's all very ambitious, and from what we've played of the early access code, it's also a heap of fun. The blocky nature of the ships is a constant reminder of the modular design, and the fact that these modules can be blown off or destroyed during combat, effecting the way ships handle and limiting their capabilities makes the game feel far more intricate than the graphics might otherwise imply.

As it stands there doesn't seem to be much, if any difference in handling with most ships, regardless of how engines are positioned, but that should definitely change as development progresses. Some of the features that the developers say are being worked on for coming updates include ship booster and augmentation modules (probably for refined control and speed bursts), random encounters, space stations dedicated to the different factions that could be friendly or hostile depending on your actions, special functions for scanner modules, different tiers for modules probably requiring faction reputation or research to unlock, crafting (enabling players to make their own modules) and further customisation through painting ships. It's all looking very promising.

DANIEL WILKS PC

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Games 260

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMES

There but for the grace...

One game, two very different experiences

We really like doing conversational reviews of sufficiently big or impactful games. Getting two or more people to talk about their experiences of a title offers a much wider set of insights into what works - and what doesn't.

Most of the time, the two reviewers are more or less on the some page, but for this month's review of Torment: Tides of Numenera, Daniel and I had very different experiences of the vast RPG. Some of that comes down to taste, as you'll see in the review, but with a game this large, seemingly random decisions can have a massive impact.

In this instance, it was simply down to the order we played certain sections of the game, and what NPCs we talked to. I spoke to a LOT of gameworld's inhabitants, but somehow managed to not pick up any party-members; unlike Daniel, who seemed to pretty much easily collect the set.

I stand by my thoughts on the game, but it's an interesting look at how player decision in games of this scale can really skew those vital first thoughts.

David Hollingworth
Digital Editor

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SCORING SYSTEM | PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 10 scale. The higher, the better – though 10 is by no means a "perfect" game. We're not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 10 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 5 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn't excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you'll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

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Torment: Tides of Numenera

Wish upon a falling star

DEVELOPER INXILE ENTERTAINMENT
PUBLISHER TECHLAND PUBLISHING
PRICE $44.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM, GOG
torment.inxile-entertainment.com

WILKS: I'm something of a fan of Monte Cook and I have been for a while. While I liked his work on D&D 3rd Edition and on d20 Call of Cthulhu, he really came into his own as a game designer when he left Wizards of the Coast and started Monte Cook Games. Numenera and The Strange, his two games based on the Cypher rule system are right up my alley. They have a simple but flexible system and settings that actively encourage anyone running a game to get more than a little weird. Numenera, the RPG world in which Torment is set, has a great premise, in a way predicated on the Arthur C. Clarke adage, "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

Set one billion years in the future, Numenera proposes a world built on the remains of countless previous civilisations. It's post-post-apocalypse in a way. Civilisation has developed again around the technology left behind by those that came before. Some technology makes sense and is used in a manner befitting its design. Other technology is alien. The air swarms with nanotechnology that some people can manipulate. Strange creatures both from Earth and other dimensions coexist with machine intelligences. It's an odd world but one almost uniquely suited for the spiritual successor to one of the greatest RPGs of all time, Planescape: Torment.

HOLLINGWORTH: Torment really is a love-letter to its successor, too, from the isometric game engine, to its world of weird and often more than a little grotesque creations. In just one of the game's areas, there's a forge built around the always-firing engines of a vast, grounded starship, a bipedal insect invasion emerging from the walls, and vats of gently undulating live meat byproducts sat next to a food cart.

Oh, and a random dude with no head who only says "bixxt" and "criiik".

In fact, there is so much weirdness, so soon, that Torment can feel a little overwhelming. And even the main plot is almost literally out of this world. You play someone known only as The Last Castoff, your body once but no longer a vessel for the mysterious Changing God (whose cultists think you are just the BEST THING EVER), and the game opens with you falling from a great height before smashing into a glass roofed mausoleum and then waking up in construct made from your own psyche and… It's a lot to take in! But one thing it isn't is pedestrian, and it's a refreshingly weird and alien take on classic fantasy and science fiction tropes. Can you dig it, Daniel?

> "it's a refreshingly weird and alien take on classic fantasy and sci-fi tropes"

WILKS: I definitely dig it. In keeping with modern RPG sensibilities, the first 30 minutes or more of the game are just taken up by character creation - not in the traditional rolling dice and looking through rulebooks sense, but in the fact that you actively play through character creation, solving puzzles and answering questions to flesh out exactly who The Last Castoff is. The Cypher system

that Torment is built around is simple when it comes to stats and classes - there are only three of each - but within the system there is a lot of nuance when it comes to character creation.

After working my way through the maze in my head and answering questions Voight Kampff style, the result spat out for me was that my version of The Last Castoff was a Clever Jack. Jacks are jack of all trades, not specialising in any specific area. The Clever part of the class title means that she focussed primarily on Intellect, the stat covering knowledge, cunning and charisma. The two other stats, Strength and Speed have equally broad purviews. You rolled a Nano, right David?

HOLLINGWORTH: A Perceptive Nano, no less. Nanos are effectively spell-casters, able to manipulate the raw nanotechnology that infests most of the world of Numenera. But, basically, it means spells. The third class is the Glaive, who are basically your classic warriors.

To be honest, that's kind of what I thought I was aiming towards with some of the decisions I made during the early game, and once you've completed that part of the game, you do get the chance to change what the game thinks you should be; I thought I'd play something I don't normally, and stuck with Nano.

The stats are certainly elegant, and the related skills and abilities are easy to understand. Levelling is a little odd, though, with each level being made up of tiers, and the ability to pick a single upgrade to a stat or skill with each tier. And, thankfully, you earn XP for all kinds of things, from talking to people, completing quests, and more. And speaking of, well, speaking, hoo-boy there is a lot of it. I must admit, I do prefer my RPGs - at least my videogame RPGs - to be a little more action-heavy; Torment is much more cerebral than most similar games, and the game's stat economy - you spend your stats to ensure success in nearly everything, and once spent you need to sleep to restore your vitality - really does push players to talk first. Thankfully, the game is pretty well-written, and conversation trees and skills related to interaction make it a very rich experience.

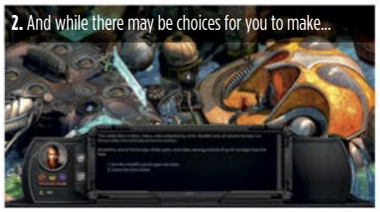
But that same stat economy makes playing an actual fighty character really difficult. You'll be taking a LOT of naps, and I must admit that constant awareness that skill-use is a resource really took me out of the game. But then, I've never liked that mechanic, either on the tabletop or in a videogame.

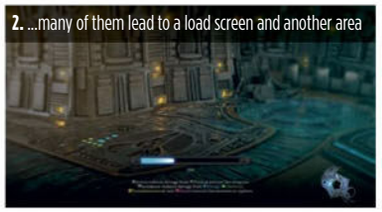
But you're doing pretty well with just talking through the game, aren't you?

WILKS: I am - aside from the tutorial I have had exactly one fight against some extra-planar beings that I saw in a mirror and they didn't appreciate me looking at them. That fight was a little rough but I prevailed thanks to stacking a heap of negative "fettles" (status effects) on the enemies through using a bunch of different skills that lower defence and accuracy. I did get into two other "crises" - that's the Numenera word for a battle situation - but I talked my way out of one fight and used the environment to turn the enemies in the other into, if not necessarily allies, then at least non-combatants. There was one other fight but that was in a psychic realm with a bunch of NPC support, so I'm not sure if that counts.

SEQUENCE

SMALL WORLD





Scan Thoughts
Type Ability
The surface thoughts of most people or creatures you speak with appear in conversations.
While speaking with the inhabitants of the Ninth World, you will sometimes hear their thoughts. This is often helpful, though rarely appreciated.

Spending stats does come across as a little restrictive at the early stages of the game, but that's deliberate, I think. I means players have to be wary about how many stat points they use, if any, in case they are needed later. In addition to raising stat pools and buying new skills and abilities, at some thresholds you can also buy "edges" for stats. These mean that there is an extra level of success on any skill related to that stat, so you may not need to spend as many points, if any, to succeed - someone with two edge in intellect would have the same chance of success as a character with the same skill and no edge spending two intellect.

I'm really digging the game and can't wait to have a little down-time to explore more of the Ninth World, but it doesn't sound like you're having as much fun as me. Is it just the stats getting you down?

HOLLINGWORTH: Yeah, working on Edges can really start to make you feel a lot more competent, but I think my main issue is that the game seems to obfuscate a lot of its mechanics, not to mention its setting. The latter is due to the fact that - classic trope warning! - when the game begins you have no access to any memories. This does get explained, and it means a player's lack of world knowledge is reflected well in game, but it can be a little frustrating. The game's lore is deep and more than a little unforgiving.

But it's as if the game wants that mystery to extend to how the mechanics work. For instance, while it's great that the game does away with the usual good/evil axis of morality, and replaces it with a five-colour system that's not really about morality at all, it's hard to keep track of what each colour represents, let alone how developed you are in each one, and what that means. Being told you've just scored some Paragon points may be a little old-hat, but a pop-up saying you've just earned a tiny amount of blue is less than useful.

And while I don't want to harp about the stat economy (I am TOTALLY going to harp about it), it's so easy to run out of points early in the game that just one encounter can see one or more of your stats (and your party-members') zeroed out, meaning you need to rest to get them back. But so far I've only found one place I can sleep, so that means getting out of a fight (or just dying, as that at least gets you back near one of the main hubs), and then moving through three or more areas, each requiring a ponderous load time. The setting itself is rich and immersive, but the constant loading when you're moving from

GETTING WEIRD

1. The coloured numbers represent the remaining stats available to spend

2. The Last Castoff is a cypher, much like The Nameless One from Planescape: Torment

3. Available skills and gear/ Numenera. Skills can use stats to activate, but gear only takes an action

4. Turn order is shown in this bar. If there are enemies hidden in the fog of war, they sometimes still appear in the order

5. Castillege is but one of the companions in the game. She is a nano who broke through dimensional barriers and is shadowed by alternate selves

6. Pass the red line and you can no longer perform an action that turn

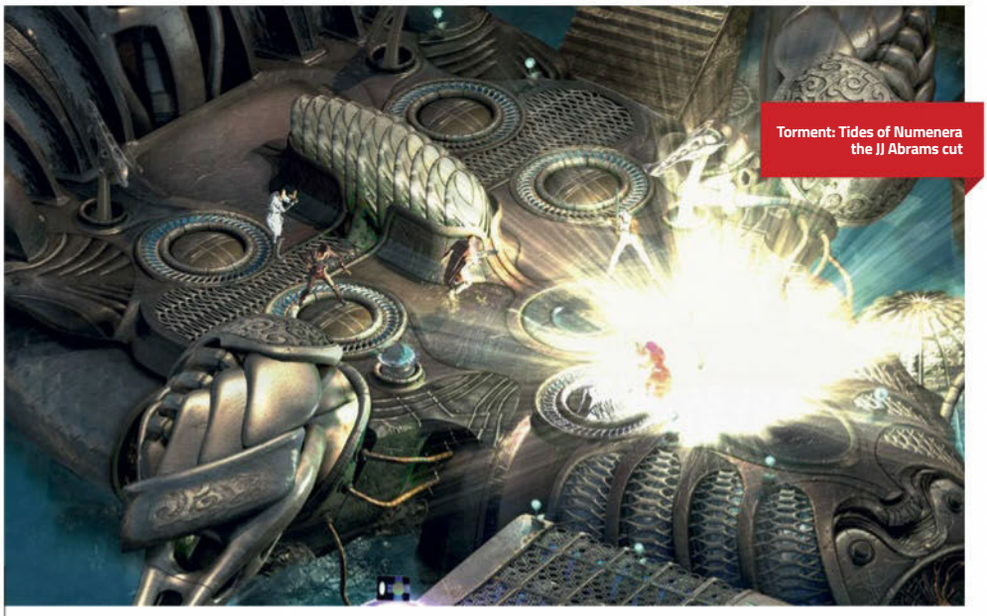
Qorro - "To be frank, I considered ambushing you. But Salimeri..." He pauses, then forces the words out. "Salimeri cares for you."
He meets your eyes. "And in all honesty, I need a favor."
452
CONTINUE

Yeah, the Changing God has a heap of groupies

location to location - as much of the quests require - is more than a little frustrating. I think that's my main issue - the game is good, but a lot of it is really frustrating me. That and the crashes, but that may just be me.

WILKS: No crashes here, but I do get where you're coming from when it comes to the backtracking and repetition. Things do open up, but for the first 12-15 hours of the game you'll be running around the same half dozen or so screens, talking to various people to progress quests or at least get some information to help you progress a quest. There are only two places to rest in the first hub as far as I know, one unlocked through a quest and the other through currency. It does feel a little restrictive, but later you can buy or find healing items that work on replenishing stats. As far as the trope goes, I know what you mean, but I think it's very deliberate here, both as a spiritual successor to a game all about someone uncovering their past, and also due to the fact that I have a feeling that the entire game is essentially about character creation. The Last Castoff is a blank slate, and each action influences how and when they remember things about who they were before the Changing God deserted them. Each person you talk to can potentially fill in blanks about the character, or give you an opportunity to make a concept more tangible.

I can't believe we've made it all this way without actually talking about the Numenera. This catch-all term for technological items from previous civilisations is a major aspect of the setting and character of the game. Numenera come in three tiers; Oddities, Cyphers and Artifacts. Oddities are strange devices that don't do anything particularly useful but are cool and can be sold for cash. Cyphers are single use, unstable items. Players can only carry a few before the clashing energy fields of Cyphers begin to cause negative effects. Artifacts are permanent items that can be used in perpetuity. In addition to weapons, armour and gadgets, there are also what are called bonded artifacts. These are biological or cybernetic augments that can seriously affect the way you play.



Torment: Tides of Numenera the JJ Abrams cut

> undeniably epic, and very well-written & designed, but not enough to make up for backtracking

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You want to know what the headless guy is saying
+ You like to spend your time wandering back and forth between areas
+ You would rather talk than fight
+ You are the discarded body of an immortal
+ You have a labyrinth in your head

HOLLINGWORTH: Yeah, the gear is all really interesting, and I can already tell that the game is going to take things to a wholly epic level of power by its end. But I have to admit, it's not a game I can see myself sticking with, at least not with my character as it currently stands. The game is undeniably epic, and very well-written and designed, but not enough to make up for backtracking, the at times repetitive conversations, and the early roadblocks. The game works best when it's fresh, and the weirdness is, well, weird. But the sixth time you walk past the same mysterious construct of glowing alien metal that mystery gets pretty mundane.

Though, I have to admit, I am kinda curious about that headless guy. Daniel, are you sticking with it?

WILKS: I want to learn his headless language and add it to my repertoire. Yeah, I'm definitely going to be sticking with it. This is very much my type of game. I always get stuck into a deep new mythology, and I am undeniably attracted to strange narratives. I'm looking forward to finding out more about the Changing God, and maybe punching him in the face a little. Abandoning a body while it's falling at terminal velocity is just mean. *DANIEL WILKS and DAVID HOLLINGWORTH* PC

OR TRY THIS:

PILLARS OF ETERNITY
OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT, 2015
▲ Epic isometric roleplaying
▼ Can drag

SHADOWRUN: DRAGONFALL - DIRECTOR'S CUT
HAREBRAINED SCHEMES, 2014
▲ The definitive Shadowrun game
▼ I've finished it twice

WASTELAND 2: DIRECTOR'S CUT
INXILE ENTERTAINMENT, 2014
▲ Grim post-apocalypse
▼ Punishing

VERDICT:

Hollingworth: An amazingly deep and unique roleplaying experience, but marred by roadblock mechanics and repetitive gameplay elements. **6**

Wilks: A deep and fascinating world with a compelling narrative and large degree of player agency. **8**

Sniper Elite 4

Ending the Nazi menace, one burst testicle at a time

DEVELOPER REBELLION
PUBLISHER REBELLION
PRICE $59.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
sniperelite4.com

It would be all too easy to classify the Sniper Elite series as some kind of WWII themed gore porn. It is, after all, a series that has become identifiable with its hyper gory x-ray gunshots that show in loving detail bullets ripping through Nazi flesh and obliterating bone and organ alike. Any game that lovingly renders testicles with the express purpose of popping them with high velocity lead is obviously more interested in making a splash more than it is historical accuracy or any kind of nuance. When it comes to the reason for all of the x-ray deaths and testicle explosions, Sniper Elite 4 is perfunctory at best – there is an over the top evil Nazi and a superweapon that only you, a gruff American master sniper and all round killer, can stop. You do this by infiltrating and murdering your way through eight large, open levels until the ultimate target of your murder spree is in your crosshairs. While the story might lack any subtlety or nuance, the gameplay of the fourth game in the Sniper Elite series is the most varied and satisfying so far.

While climbing up to high vantage points and taking your time to scope out all the enemies in an area before picking them off one by one is still the go-to action of the game, some new movement mechanics and vastly improved close range and stealth combat mechanics make reaching these heights much more enjoyable. Players can now climb certain surfaces and move in and out of some windows, giving far more options when it comes to scaling buildings and remaining unseen. If you are spotted, the close range shooting with a pistol or Tommy gun is more accurate and satisfying than in previous games. Up close shooting is still little more than an adequate, no frills stop-and-pop cover shooter, but that's still light years ahead of what came before. A simple Splinter Cell-style last known position marker can be used to lead enemies into traps or away from your destination. Stealth and melee kills have also been improved. Taking out enemies with a swift punch that smashes the enemy's jaw and severs the spine, or obliterates the hyoid bone is even more satisfying than doing it at range. A few multiplayer options round out the package, with Enemy at the Gates-tyle sniper battles being the slow but tense highlight.

For all the improvements, not everything is great about Sniper Elite 4. The enemy AI is erratic to say the least. Sometimes they are preternaturally aware, and at other times you'll find half the enemies in a given area hunkered down behind your last known position. On normal difficulty it's a little too easy as well, with the improvements in close range shooting making mopping up any mistakes a rather simple action. Still, if you like the idea of taking it slow, scoping out your enemy and splattering their brains (or the contents of their trousers) all over a wall, in the name of freedom of course, Sniper Elite 4 will definitely scratch that itch. *TAVISH FORREST* PC

Score bonus points for not spoiling the cut of meat. (That's not true.)

> "some new movement mechanics and vastly improved close range and stealth combat"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You really hate Nazis
+ You really hate gonads
+ You like to watch

OR TRY THIS:

ENEMY FRONT
CI GAMES, 2014
▲ Open-ended gameplay
▼ Mostly run and gun

SNIPER: GHOST WARRIOR II
CITY INTERACTIVE, 2013
▲ Modern sniping
▼ Ghost Warrior III coming soon

ZOMBIE ARMY TRILOGY
REBELLION, 2015
▲ Kill demon Hitler
▼ Zombie testicles

VERDICT:

If destroying Nazi testicles is your thing, then look no further

8

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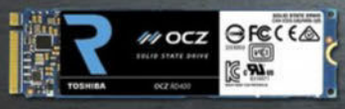

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- Read and write speed may vary depending on the host device, read and write conditions, and file size.
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ocz.com

For Honor

All hacking, all the time

DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTREAL
PUBLISHER UBISOFT
PRICE $60.95
AVAILABLE AT STEAM, UPLAY, RETAIL
forhonor.ubisoft.com

You know that Simpsons joke, about nuts and gum, two great flavours together at last? For Honor is kind of like that; legitimately cool things smooshed together into a gloriously ahistorical whole. It kind of feels wrong to point out that the game is dead-set silly in its premise, but let's face it – Vikings fighting Knights fighting Samurai in some weirdly post-apocalyptic fantasy world is kind of weird.

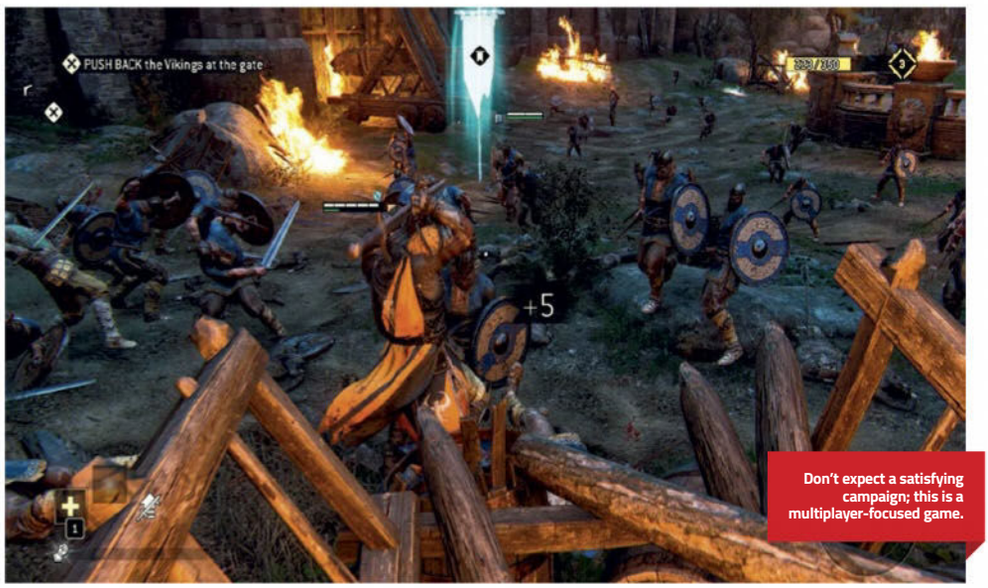
Thankfully, though, despite a truly dire singleplayer campaign, the basic mechanics of For Honor are amazingly slick, and the game itself is impressively deep. It's more than just a hack-and-slash beat-'em-up – it's much more like a proper fighting game, with deep combos and special moves, combined with a wonderful basic mechanic. The basic moves – one heavy attack, one light – are built around the need to defend from one of three directions: left, right, and above. And you can only attack from the direction you are defending against. Lock onto an enemy and you move with them, and you can see the direction they're defending, and thus the direction their attacks will come from; match that direction, and you can block them, but they too will be blocking on that same angle. So, to get around your enemy, you need to be able to quickly cover an attack angle, switch to another, launch an attack, and either move your guard again, or back away.

And that's before you start mastering the special moves and class-based combos. It's surprisingly intuitive, and makes for some remarkably intense combat.

The game also offers a range of modes, from one-on-one duels to four-on-four grudge fests over capture points that also feature waves of easily killable mooks. There may not be many maps at launch, but the combination of game modes, classes, and some very lethal environments means that each game you play always feels fresh and challenging. And there's some really interesting tactical opportunities that the low player count really opens up. In my favourite mode, which places the two four-player teams into distinct match-ups spread all over the level, you've got a number of options even before you clash weapons. You can fake out your own opponent, and dash to help another team-mate in a brief, two-on-one clash, or you can hover around in the background, ready to revive fallen comrades. And the verticality of these maps, combined with various pushbacks and throws, means you really need to think about how you're going to move around them.

Sadly, the game is far from perfect, especially on PC. For one thing – and this is not Ubisoft's problem at all – the player count is relatively low, meaning that playing during off-peak times can make it hard to find a populated match.

And, when you do get into a match, connection issues can be amazingly lethal, and so far, I've only had one match without at least a few-second pause in the game while the connection dangles in the wind. This would be bad enough in a shooter, but in a game about close-in action, and split-second



Don't expect a satisfying campaign; this is a multiplayer-focused game.

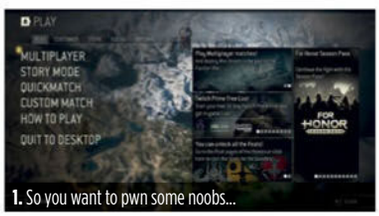
> fast becoming the kind of game where your team-mates will tear you a new one

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You love historical mashups
+ You just want to kill mooks
+ You're tired of long-distance murder

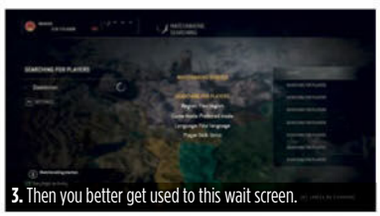
SEQUENCE

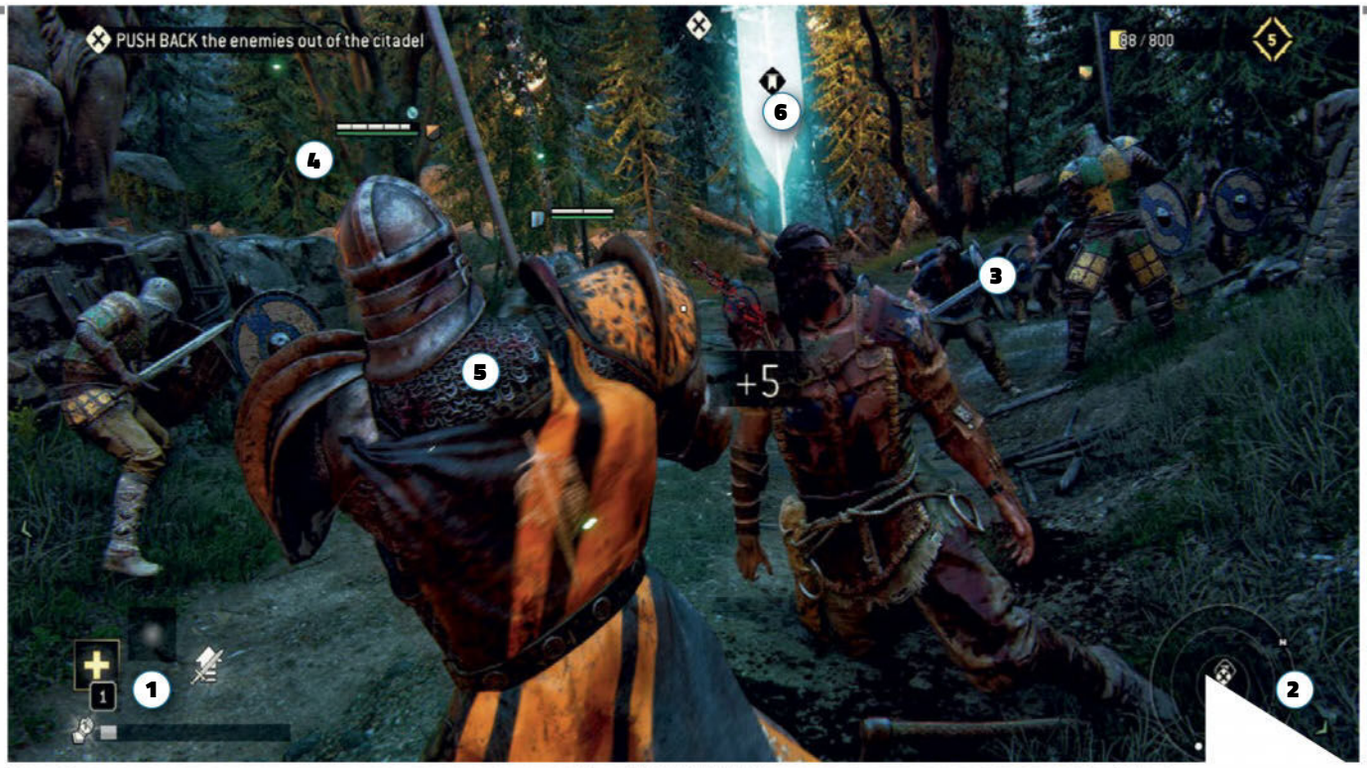
HURRY UP AND...



1. So you want to pwn some noobs...

2. Maybe take some ground for your faction...


3. Then you better get used to this wait screen.



It's fun to use this ballista, but it's effectively meaningless - like much of the SP!

timing, chances are you're going to find yourself very dead when the game connections restores itself.

But more problematic is how poorly Ubisoft presents all the information in a game. The tutorials are criminally basic, and the guides to each class's special moves and tricks are hidden behind layers of UI. Similarly, the gear system seems under-explained at best, not to mention prone to paying-to-win. This awkwardly matches up with another problem that is, again, not really Ubi's fault. It's fast becoming the kind of game where your team-mates will tear you a new one if you're not operating at the same level as them; the game's very competitive and it already has a community to match. I really like the game, but I'm not wedded to learning it back to front, and more than once I've copped flack for "not playing properly."

It's not an issue with the game, *per se*, but it does detract from the overall experience. To get the most out of For Honor, you're really going to need to get to grips with how awful it is at teaching you to play, and move beyond that.

For Honor will no doubt reward those who can look past these flaws. Its frenetic combat hides a deep system of special moves and counters, combined with some impressive lethal levels. And it looks amazing, even if I do have a small conniption every time I see a horned Viking helmet. It's a bold move for Ubisoft, and we've no doubt that For Honor could make a big impact not only as a game, but also in eSports. Watch this medieval space.

DAVID HOLLINGWORTH PC

CUT YOUR BLOODY SWATHE

1. Picking the right feats is an important tactical decision

2. The minimap can be useful, but you rarely get time to use it

3. Behold! A MIGHTY MOOK

4. Tracking your health is always important, but losing track of stamina can be just as deadly

5. Performing an execution on a defeated foe can restore some health

6. Men! Take that glowy thing and HOLD THE LINE!

OR TRY THIS:

SKYRIM
BETHESDA 2011
▲ Great of you want some substance to your hack+slash
▼ Lacking Samurai

THE BANNER SAGA
STOIC 2014
▲ Viking double down
▼ Still no Samurai

STREET FIGHTER V
CAPCOM 2016
▲ Pure, bare-handed fighting
▼ Sorry, Samurai fans

VERDICT:

Amazingly rich gameplay that is sadly let down by an overly complex UI and hidden barely there tutorials. Sure to be a long term hit.

7

Tales of Berseria

A tale of sound and fury signifying much

DEVELOPER BANDAI NAMCO STUDIOS INC.
PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT
PRICE $49.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
bandainamcoent.eu/product/tales-of-berseria/pc

The Tales franchise has been around roughly forever, delivering players a reliable dose of melodrama and real-time combat wrapped in a slightly lacklustre but still kind of charming shell. Berseria, the 16th game in the main series (there are also a number of side games and spinoffs) is, rather surprisingly, one of the best of the series, and is by far the most mature and nuanced when it comes to character. Rather than following the epic and mostly noble heroics of previous Tales games, Berseria instead focuses on a group of broken people doing the wrong things for questionable and morally difficult reasons and it's all the better for it.

The start of Berseria is slow but necessary for setting up the sometimes entirely unlikeable protagonist. As a young girl, Velvet Crowe and her younger brother Laphicet were saved from the Daemonblight by her brother-in-law, Artorius. Years later, Velvet witnessed Artorius sacrifice Laphicet to try and quell another outbreak of the Daemonblight. Overcome with rage, and trying to escape the same fate as her brother, Velvet's arm was infected by the Daemonblight, giving her demonic powers as well as the ability to consume other demons. There's a fight and she is imprisoned for three years before escaping. Got all that? This is our hero - a half demon woman half mad with rage willing to do what it takes to get revenge on the man who sacrificed her brother, even if he may be the only chance the world has for peace. Place such a volatile force in the company of equally broken or unbalanced characters and you have a recipe for some great interpersonal stories and high melodrama.

No wonder she's so mad. Having to wear that into battle must be infuriating.

> "our hero - a half demon woman half mad with rage willing to do what it takes to get revenge"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ Your sibling was sacrificed in front of your eyes
+ You live for nothing but revenge
+ You have an infected arm

It's a pity that this level of nuance didn't extend past the story, as some of the existing mechanics of technology of the Tales series definitely hold the game back. There have been a few tweaks to the real-time combat system that make a refreshing, if slight, change of pace to battles for series veterans. For everyone else, the combat system is initially fun and exciting, with players assigning "arts" to different keys and creating their own combos that can be improved or increased by unlocking new arts or by gaining souls by killing or knocking out enemies. Unfortunately, about two-thirds of the way through the 40-odd hours of the campaign, the combat system outstays its welcome.

Likewise the level design and graphics engine don't do the game any favours, with areas being restrictively linear and many dungeons just coming across as palette swaps from previous dungeons. While character design is quite attractive, the graphics engine looks a generation old or more. If you can slog your way through the battles towards the end of the game, and don't get frustrated running along the next narrow path to the next area, there is a lot to like about Tales of Berseria. It's rare to see a JRPG so willing to embrace single minded revenge as a driving motivation of the main character and give the "villain" such a nuanced perspective, and it would be a shame not to experience it. *TAVISH FORREST* PC

OR TRY THIS:

TALES OF SYMPHONIA
BANDAI NAMCO, 2016
▲ Music based JRPG
▼ Often juvenile

TALES OF ZESTIRIA
BANDAI NAMCO, 2015
▲ Fuse characters together
▼ Full of JRPG clichés

YS ORIGIN
NIHON FALCOM, 2012
▲ Classic, fantastic action JRPG
▼ Not fuelled by revenge

VERDICT:

The 16th game in the Tales series is also the most adult. Who would have thunk it?

8

Hollow Knight

Tim Burton's Dark Souls

DEVELOPER TEAM CHERRY
PUBLISHER TEAM CHERRY
PRICE $14.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM, GOG
hollowknight.com

Beneath the adorably gothic façade of Hollow Knight lies a game that all but refuses to compromise or hold your hand. The cute insect enemies and near chibi hero may give the impression that Hollow Knight is a game for a younger audience, but first impressions can be deceiving, and here, expecting anything but a tough Metroidvania style platformer with an undeniable hint of Dark Souls would definitely be a mistake. The enemies may be bugs and other things that crawl in the dirt, but they're just as deadly as any skeleton, zombie or black knight. Wielding a blade called nail, players delve into the depths of Hallownest, an old kingdom buried under the town of Dirtmouth. Long dormant, the denizens of Hallownest are stirring, and it's up to those brave or foolish enough to brave the soil and find out what's going on.

While the platforming and exploration based gameplay will feel pleasantly familiar to anyone who has played a Metroidvania style platformer, one of the real defining characteristics of the game, and something that really makes it stand out from the pack is the granular combat and the give and take nature of the abilities of the knight. Combat is finely tuned and nuanced thanks to directional attacks, challenging attack and defence sequences, and a plethora of enemies and bosses to face. The keyboard controls for Hollow Knight are well implemented, but, as with many platformers, playing with a controller is a wholly more satisfying experience. Outside of regular attacks, each of which knock the knight back a small way, adding an interesting rhythm to fights and all but eliminating attack spamming, the player also has access to some special powers, either a powerful attack or a self-heal. These abilities use a resource gathered through hitting enemies rather than killing them, adding an interesting dynamic to fights, especially against bosses. You need to get up close to gain some meter, but is it better to lash out with a big attack, or should you back off and try to heal any damage accumulated while gaining power?

Aside from the approach to combat, there are a few other mechanics that feels Souls inspired. Rather than saving at bonfire, the knight instead rests on a bench, and when you die you must run from the last bench you sat on to the location of your death to reclaim any currency you were carrying. In an interesting twist, the knight also has to fight his own ghost to reclaim any dropped money.

As enjoyable as Hollow Knight is, there is one major frustration that holds the game back a little. To find a map of a level, players must find the cartographer of that level, and finding them can easily fall into repetitive backtracking and frustrating exploration that relies solely on memory rather than any in game clues. That may appeal to some gamers, but given the complexity of the game already, having to cast about all but blind feels a little more like a roadblock than a satisfying gameplay decision.
TAVISH FORREST PC

3400 is the number of times Tavish died while writing this review.

> "the knight also has to fight his own ghost to reclaim any dropped money"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You want to stab a pill bug
+ You like to play in the dirt
+ You're a tiny killer

OR TRY THIS:

ROGUE LEGACY
CELLAR DOOR GAMES, 2013
▲ Generational Metroidvania Rogue-lite
▼ Vertigo trait

SALT AND SANCTUARY
SKA STUDIOS, 2016
▲ 2D Souls RPG
▼ Iffy platforming

ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST
MOON STUDIOS GMBH, 2016
▲ Gorgeous atmospheric platforming
▼ Overwhelming controls

VERDICT:

A challenging, nuanced and beautifully made exploration platformer resides beneath the charming, cutesy hand painted graphics

8

Berserk and the Band of the Hawk

Guts, not Glory

DEVELOPER KOEI TECMO
PUBLISHER KOEI TECMO
PRICE $53.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
www.koeitecmoamerica.com/berserk

The best thing that can be said about Berserk and the Band of the Hawk is that it is a rather excellent gateway into the 28 year old Berserk manga series, thanks to the two or so hours of anime and CG cutscenes detailing some of the most important events in the life of Berserk protagonist, Guts. You see him transform from a homicidally angry teenage mercenary driven by rage and bloodlust, to a homicidally angry adult driven by rage and revenge. That may not seem like a particularly huge difference, but compared to how the action in the game progresses, it's a radical transformation.

Berserk is a series almost ideally suited to being included in the Omega Force stable of games. In everything but look, Guts is the type of character you see in the Dynasty Warriors series - a phenomenally powerful warrior capable of cutting his way through waves of enemies with ease and dispatching a dozen or more foes with a single swipe of his sword. Unfortunately Dynasty Warriors has something that is sadly lacking from Berserk - variety. Without any multiplayer available, players of Berserk are limited to three modes - a 46 mission story mode, a free mode that allows people to play through already completed story missions with new characters, and an endurance mode in which players can take any character through a 100 level dungeon.

Of the 46 story missions, only five feature a character other than Guts. With so little variation as to how battles play out, things become very dull, and remarkably easy, very fast. Given the fact that players can only use unlocked characters in a repetitive and draining endurance mode, or to play through story missions you've already completed detracts from the appeal of playing them beyond their single chapter. Combat is adequate but uninspired, especially given how good the last two Omega Force, non Dynasty Warriors games have been. There is some satisfaction to be had charging up and using a massive execution move capable of killing every enemy in range, but after the 50th time you've reduced every enemy to glowing balls it begins to lose its charm. By the time the 500th time rolls around you're barely even aware it has happened.

Missions are broken into three types but with the exception of a few novel boss battles (including the best against Nosferatu Zodd, a battle made interesting due to its one-on-one nature), all feel the same, the major difference being the interstitial cutscenes. The best mechanic of the Dynasty Warrior series, region dominance, plays such a small role that it's debatable whether it's there at all.

Aside from the cutscenes either taken from the excellent Golden Age anime film trilogy, and the interesting CG cutscenes that add depth to Guts' story, there isn't a whole heap to recommend Berserk and the Band of the Hawk. It's linear, repetitive, and nothing more than adequate. A few of the interstitial bits are also kind of rapey as well. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

Hurry up and kill it so we can watch the cutscenes.

> after the 50th time you've reduced every enemy to glowing balls it begins to lose its charm

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You dig the manga
+ You want to do the same thing for hours
+ Nosferatu Zodd

OR TRY THIS:

SENRA KAGURA SHINOVI VERSUS
TAMSOFT, 2016
▲ Lots of characters
▼ Made solely of fanservice

MITSURUGI KAMUI HAIKAE
ZENITH BLUE, 2014
▲ Excellent combat
▼ Only one character

DYNASTY WARRIORS 8: XTREME LEGENDS COMPLETE
KOEI TECMO, 2014
▲ So much content
▼ Still Dynasty Warriors

VERDICT:

When the best parts of a game are the parts that aren't the game, something is wrong

4

fractal design

Performance without restrictions

Define C series

DVD Contents

DEMO-LICIOUS

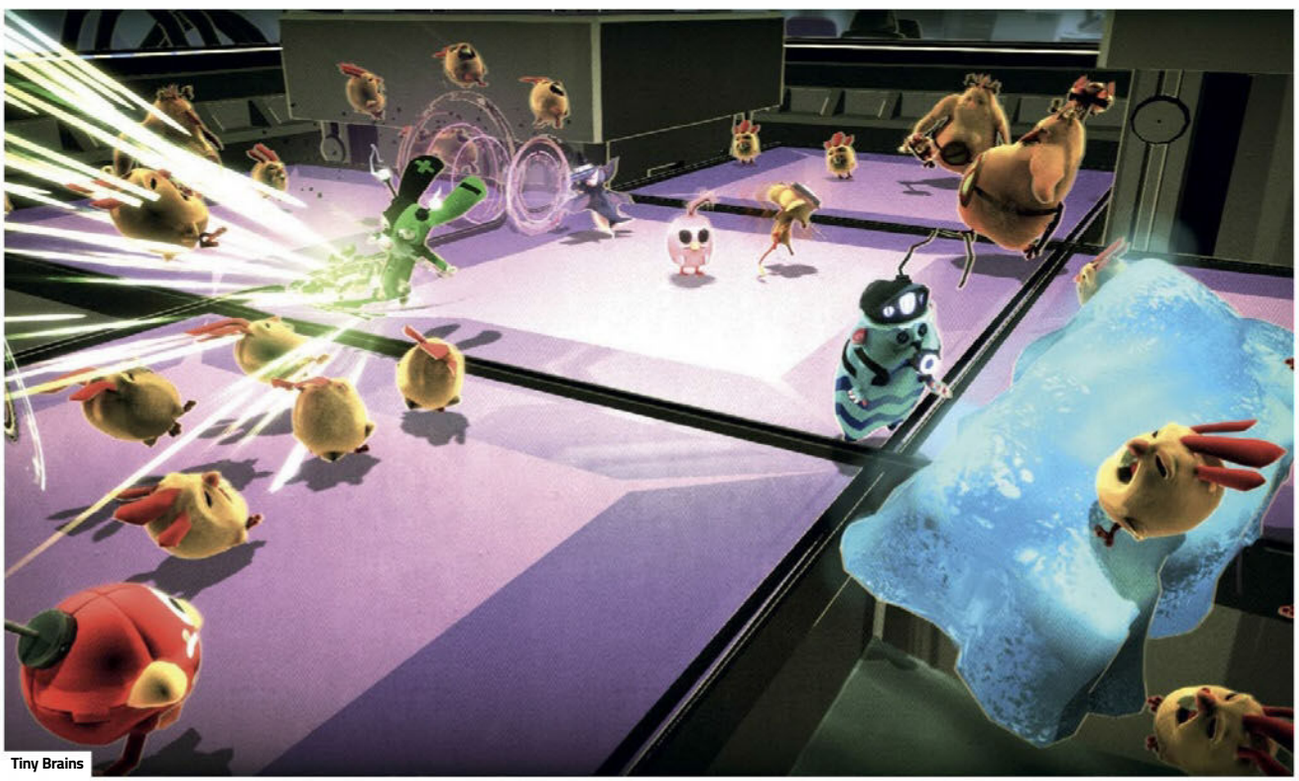
For the last little bit we've been focussing on free games on the disk, but we thought we might mix it up by concentrating more on demos of some rather sweet looking upcoming (and currently available) games. Let us know what type of content you're after be emailing us at letters@pcpowerplay.com.au, on on our forums at www.pcpowerplay.com.au and we'll see what we can do.

Enjoy.

The PCPP Team.

32 FREE GAMES AND DEMOS!

- A Long Road Home Demo
- Abyssal Zone Demo
- Animal Lover Demo
- Blueshift (VR)
- Bunnyrama Demo
- Clean'Em Up
- Convicted Galaxy Demo
- Din's Curse Demo
- Drox Operative Demo
- Final Days (Alpha Demo)
- Final Exam Demo
- Found (VR)
- Grave Danger Demo
- GundeadliGne Demo
- Kitten Squad
- Kokurase - Episode 1
- Midas Gold Plus Demo
- Orbiz Demo
- Organ Quarter Pre-Alpha Demo
- Out Of The Box Demo
- Putrefaction 2 Void Walker Demo
- Riders of Asgard Demo
- RUNNING WITH RIFLES Demo
- Serena
- Shiftlings Demo
- Three Kingdoms The Last Warlord Demo
- Tiny Brains Demo
- Unreal Heroes Demo
- Wacky Wings Demo
- Win Big Or Die
- XenoRaptor Demo
- Zaccaria Pinball



Tiny Brains

Installation instructions included on the disc. Browse the disc and launch **index.html** for more.

USING THE DVDS
PC PowerPlay DVDs are suitable for use in almost any computer but the software contained on the medium is for Windows operating systems only. Because each PC is different, PC PowerPlay and Next Media cannot guarantee the DVDs will operate as expected on every system, despite strict adherence to Windows compatibility.

LOADING
The DVDs are set to autostart. On insertion it will load the DVD's Terms and Conditions of Use disclaimer in your default Web browser. If the DVD failed to autostart, you can load the menu manually by running the file called start.htm in the root directory using Windows Explorer.

VIRUSES
These DVDs are rigorously checked for viruses during production, however, PC PowerPlay can make no guarantees to this end. Next Media always recommends that the DVDs be scanned using your own anti-virus software on first and subsequent uses.

INSTALLING SOFTWARE
Simply click the install/download link under a file's description to launch the installation program. please ensure that all other programs are closed and that any anti-virus software is disabled before performing a software installation. Due to STEAM region locking, not all content may be available toutside Australia.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT
PC PowerPlay assumes the end-user of these DVDs has the necessary computer knowledge required to operate and install software from this product, and cannot provide technical support either for this or for any of the software contained on this disc.

DVD REPLACEMENTS
PC PowerPlay can only replace DVDs that were damaged or faulty at the time of purchase. If you think a DVD fits into one of these categories then please contact the DVD Producer immediately to assess whether a replacement needs to be sent out. email: dwilks@nextmedia.com.au

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Buy online and subscribe to ***PC & Tech Authority*** at

MYMAGAZINES.COM.AU

Night in the Woods

I was born in a small town

DEVELOPER INFINITE FALL
PUBLISHER FINJI
PRICE US$20
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
www.nightinthewoods.com

At one point in Night in the Woods a minor character says to Mae, the feline protagonist, "Hey can we hang out sometime?" Mae blinks, as the two of them sit on a roof high above the main street of Possum Springs, their legs dangling over the edge, "Isn't that what we're doing?"

Night in the Woods isn't what I was expecting. I'd assumed it would be a cutesy 2D platformer with a spooky story, self-aware dialogue, and Limbo-style puzzles. I was wrong. Night in the Woods is narrative-driven adventure that consists almost entirely of conversations with friends, neighbours and other people around town.

Mostly, though, it's about hanging out.

Mae's a 20 year old college dropout who has returned to her home town of Possum Springs, the kind of working class "rust belt" town that globalisation left behind. The mine's now closed, and so's the supermarket, and every second store on Main Street is boarded up. No one has a phone because you can't get reception anyway. The kinda place where kids mostly just hang out and do dumb shit.

Mae reconnects with her old high school friends with just the right balance of enthusiasm, awkwardness and a desire to make up for lost time. She joins up with her old bandmates - still practicing and still yet to actually play a gig. She runs into younger kids who know her by reputation only, and a cranky elderly neighbour who's never forgiven her for some terrible incident in her teens. She goes to a party and throws up on her ex.

Poking through the suburban mundanity is the odd hint that not everything is quite as it seems. As Mae wanders around town, chatting with people and exploring every nook, cranny and rooftop, you'll catch glimpses of mysteries and metaphors that run much deeper. How did that janitor know your name? Why does your aunt keep warning you to be careful? Whatever happened to that missing kid?

We (though perhaps not Mae) can recommend the Doomnuts at Donut Wolf.

> "the right balance of enthusiasm, awkwardness and a desire to make up for lost time"

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You can be moved to laughter and tears
+ You feel reassured you're not the only one who feels this way
+ You like mall food courts ironically

Turns out Night in the Woods isn't really about the nocturnal, arboreal adventures of cute animals. It's about being human, growing up and the fumbling attempts to make something of our one shot at this weird thing we call life. It's about people who change, who cling to the past, who can't seem to change no matter how hard they try.

Night in the Woods is about escapism. It's about the stories we tell ourselves when we're listless and bored. It's about the fantasies we create to serve as motivation to strive for something better, or at least to give us hope that there is something better.

It's about realising it doesn't matter if your mum isn't cool because she loves you no matter how badly you screw up. It's about not knowing how to say the things you want to say to your dad but you know it means something to him when the two of you share the couch in front of his favourite tv show. It's about friendships that endure and bonds that grow stronger through fights and forgiveness.

You really should hang out there.

DAVID WILDGOOSE PC

OR TRY THIS:

FIREWATCH
CAMPO SANTO, 2016
▲ Walk and talk
▼ Add 20 years

OXENFREE
NIGHT SCHOOL STUDIO, 2016
▲ The kids are all right
▼ Too many ghosts

INSIDE
PLAYDEAD, 2016
▲ Platforms
▼ Puzzles

VERDICT:

A warm, moving tale of alienation and redemption in the era of late stage capitalism.

10

Aliens Go Home Run

'Topes win!

DEVELOPER ANIM-ACE
PUBLISHER ANIM-ACE
PRICE $3.99
AVAILABLE AT STEAM
anim-ace.itch.io/aliens-go-home-run

In both concept and execution, Aliens Go Home Run is inspired. Players take control of a little girl enamoured with baseball. Sally is both saviour and destroyer. Thanks to a homerun so powerful that it caused a disaster on another planet, aliens are invading to rid the universe from the threat of Earth once and for all. What can our baseball heroine do but use her ball hitting powers to defend us from UFOs? A combination of Arkanoid, baseball and bullet hell shooter, Aliens Go Home Run has a powerful difficulty curve, charming sprite-based design and fun soundtrack. Combine that with an appealingly low price tag and you have all the making of an indie hit.

Although each level sees the player deflecting a ball to break blocks and hit enemies, AGHR is quite unlike any other block breaking game thanks to a few very neat ideas, the first of which is the fact that the player does not die when the ball drops. Instead of the player losing a life, all the player loses is their current combo, making powerups come more infrequently and their place on the leaderboard for a level more tenuous. The reason for this is simple - players have more to concentrate on than just the ball. Enemies aren't just other forms of blocks - they are active antagonists firing spreads of bullets at the player. Each hit is a strike. Three strikes and you're out. For the first few levels it's fairly easy to avoid these bullets and hit the ball, but things heat up extremely fast, so sliding around the screen rather than simply running to the ball becomes the order of the day. Sliding makes the player immune to bullets for a short time, but they can't hit during a slide. It's a simple combination of mechanics but together they make block breaking feel entirely new and invigorating.

As far as genres go, this one's in a league of its own.

> looks and sounds like a forgotten Neo Geo classic that you read about but could never afford

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You always wanted a NeoGeo
+ You like America's pastime
+ You want sprites to live forever

Powerups drop from some destroyed blocks. There are four levels of power - a heart (giving back a life), a shield that defends against one attack, multiball and a laser that can be shot straight up. Grabbing a powerup before using the previous level of powerup unlocks the next in line - heart to shield, etc. - making their use a gamble. It may be tempting to hold out for a laser, but would a shield or an extra heart be more useful now? At later levels when enemies fill the screen with bullets and green slimes try and grab you to hold you in the line of fire, careful use of powerups is all but vital for survival.

The presentation of Aliens Go Home Run is fantastic. From the dev title screen to the animation of the young heroine and the great chiptunes soundtrack, the game looks and sounds like a forgotten Neo Geo classic that you probably read about but could never afford. That shouldn't be an issue here. Developer Anim-Ace have created an immensely fun and satisfying genre mash that should offer anyone, even players who are the hardest of hardcore, a real fun challenge. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

OR TRY THIS:

SHATTER
SIDHE, 2010
▲ Very modern brick breaking
▼ No baseball girl

WIZORB
TRIBUTE GAMES, INC, 2012
▲ Brick breaking RPG
▼ What is baseball?

BLUE REVOLVER
STELLAR CIRCLE, 2016
▲ Retro bullet hell
▼ Young girls sans baseball

VERDICT:

A mash of genres that feels like a classic game that never was

9

Halo Wars 2

A mediocre RTS to support a control system nobody wants

DEVELOPER MICROSOFT STUDIOS
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT STUDIOS
PRICE $59.99
AVAILABLE AT WINDOWS STORE
halowaypoint.com/en-au/games/halo-wars-2

There's nothing inherently wrong with a basic-arse RTS. A game with a couple of gimmicky factions, some cool superweapons, upgradeable factories for double-barrelled tanks, a resource system that doesn't strictly speaking make any sense, and lots of explosions. Those games can be fun, a way to scratch your tactical itch without the brain-sweats that a proper strategy game can bring on.

But RTS is an inherently dated genre. It exists because in the '90s, developers like Westwood realised a PC was powerful enough to manage dozens of units in real time. Dune II was basically a turn-based wargame except everything took its turn at once. But then the genre was refined, developed. It became slick, then fast, then frenetic. Pro-level StarCraft is all about actions-per-minute, about twitch skill rather than strategic brilliance. Because the strategy in RTS has always been rudimentary.

The best RTS today is like arm-wrestling. Perfectly-balanced opponents clash in the centre of a map and push against each other, seeking to exploit some weakness or error or oversight. RTS is all about speed and fury and holding a sort of gestalt vision of the battlefield in your head. Trying to out-guess your opponent even as you out-click them with mouse actions.

Then there's Halo Wars 2. Look guys! We figured out a neat way to make an RTS work quite nicely with a gamepad!

And that's it. Halo Wars 2 does indeed work quite nicely with a gamepad, which must indeed be quite nice for Xbox players. But why do we give a shit here on PC? We don't. I certainly didn't play it with a gamepad.

Ah yes the Battle for Zone B was a pivotal moment in Halo lore.

> it's insect warfare like in the before-time. Tiny units hurling themselves in doomed waves

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You just finished Halo Wars and HAVE to know what happens next!
+ You are a Halo completist.
+ You always wanted to play an RTS with a gamepad
+ You don't need your gamepad RTS to be any good

Beyond the control scheme though... why? Why does this game exist? What is it for? It doesn't extend the Halo universe or add anything meaningful to it. It doesn't do anything new for RTS. The AI isn't remarkable. The units and vehicles are all things you've seen in the main Halo games or in the original Halo Wars. How did the developers of this thing find the motivation to make it?

If you know nothing about Halo, this game will be a blur of spaceships and aliens and Warthogs and Spartans and general bafflement at the way open countryside will suddenly turn into a gigantic sci-fi megastructure with holograms and laser platforms and such. The narrative is disjointed, I'm saying.

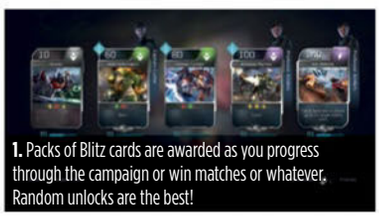
The campaign is set on the Ark, which Halo players will remember is a sort of starfish-shaped super-ringworld with various important Forerunner artefacts and machines on it.

Because a story about the core of the United Nations Space Command fighting desperately against the alien Covenant's best units on actual Earth would be too interesting, in Halo Wars 2 there is only one human ship called the Spirit of Fire. And no Covenant. Just a splinter-faction called the Banished.

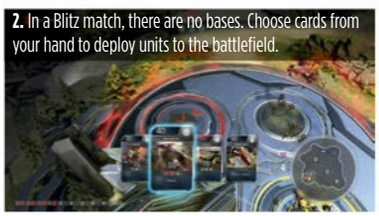
The Spirit of Fire was also the home of the human faction in the original game, which is why we're stuck with it and a bunch of military equipment that is surely obsolete elsewhere in the universe. Something, something,

SEQUENCE

ALL IN THE CARDS

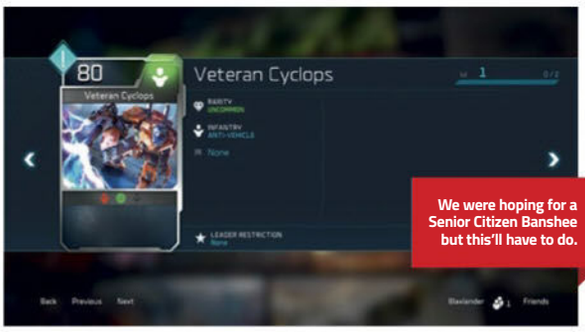


1. Packs of Blitz cards are awarded as you progress through the campaign or win matches or whatever. Random unlocks are the best!



2. In a Blitz match, there are no bases. Choose cards from your hand to deploy units to the battlefield.

3. The inevitable result is a mash of units all contesting a single, featureless metal control point. Fun!



WARTHOGS AND ALL

1. The familiar tangle of an RTS army. Vehicles are easy to identify, but infantry are ant-like.

2. Buildings must be placed on templates next to the main... thing.

3. Base defence is limited to a turret on each corner.

4. Pop cap is just 80, which makes for small-scale battles.

5. Player forces are laid out here and can be assigned for quick recall via gamepad.

6. Each sub-faction gets a Spartan. This is Alice-130. She's okay.

cryosleep, something, 28 years later mysterious signal AI on a thumbdrive Brute with an electric hammer, something really awful, inspirational speech by the captain something. The point is, the plot and the paradoxically awesomely-animated but terribly-scripted cutscenes are all just noise.

On the actual battlefield, Halo Wars 2 reveals itself as a super-old-school RTS with tiny ant-like units who are infinitely expendable, but with restricted template-based building layouts and super-tight army caps. Resources generate infinitely, with occasional battlefield bonus pickups. Each map has a few spots where forward bases can be set up. There are area-control points to capture and hold.

Otherwise, it's insect warfare like in the before-time. Tiny units hurling themselves in doomed waves. Build as many tanks as you can, throw them at the enemy. Oh he has anti tank units? Build aircraft. Rock, paper, scissors. Over and over.

Here's where it gets really silly. At the end of campaign missions the game has the audacity to award you "blitz packs" to be used with the Blitz multiplayer mode.

In this mode, the "perceived complexity" of base-building (ie clicking on a highlighted foundation template and choosing from a radial menu) is replaced with a "card-and-deck mechanic" that allows players to deploy a bunch of units, and then bring in more units after collecting "energy" that "appears randomly" on the battlefield. All quotes sic, from the Halo Wars 2 website.

Developer 343 was inspired by MOBA, see. But they didn't do a MOBA. They did an RTS. With cards. Can I play something else now?

Look, there is nothing wrong with Halo Wars 2... as a bonus game that comes free with Halo 6 or whatever. But as a premium, full-priced title? No. No, we deserve more than this. A franchise like Halo, with its rich fictional universe, its cool unit design, its super-clear mix of human and alien factions, deserves more than this.

Works real good with a gamepad though. *ANTHONY FORDHAM* PC

OR TRY THIS:

STARCRAFT II
2010, BLIZZARD
▲ RTS refined to the nth degree
▼ How fast can you think and click?

HOMEWORLD: DESERTS OF KHARAK
2016, BLACKBIRD
▲ Cool aesthetic, different ideas
▼ Not really a Homeworld game, come on

ASHES OF THE SINGULARITY
2016, OXIDE
▲ Showcase your DirectX 12 GPU!
▼ Ants? More like microbes.

VERDICT:

RTS was never about ergonomics, and it still isn't.

4

Tech 260

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMING HARDWARE

Revolutionary Verge

Is it time to put away the bucket?

I might be a tad biased, given I've been dreaming of Virtual Reality for over 20 years, but in my mind 2016 was one of the most important years for PC gaming since the advent of 3D graphics accelerators. VR finally arrived in a format that worked, was incredibly fun and solved so many of the technical issues of the past.

That's not to say it turned out to be the overnight success that so many pundits thought it would be. With total sales being a fraction of the first bullish speculations, VR launched with a tiny pop more than a bang. And yet those who have tried it, and can see how quickly it has evolved over the last two years, will know that we're on the verge of a revolution in the way we game.

Today's headsets are expensive, heavy, not exactly comfortable and still have image quality issues such as low resolution and haloing. They also require some rather grunty hardware to deliver the silky smooth framerates required so that players aren't reaching for a bucket. Finally, most of the games for VR are still really tech demos padded out to test the new mechanics this revolutionary form of gaming requires.

Yet I predict that within five years all of these issues will be resolved, to the point where HMDs will be just like popping on a pair of sunglasses, and today's quaint 2D screens will be seen as retro-gaming. And that's why I've given VR the coolest technology of 2016. There was a bunch of other hardware that also made me tingle in all the right places, and you can read more about that in our Tech of the Year feature. Meanwhile I'm keeping a close eye on my letterbox, eagerly anticipating the arrival of my Oculus Touch controllers...

Bennett Ring
Tech Editor

Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.

Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

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THE PCPP TESTBENCH

CPU
INTEL I7 3770K
intel.com.au

MOBO
GIGABYTE Z77X-UD3H
gigabyte.com.au

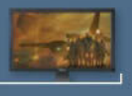
SSD
CORSAIR NEUTRON
corsair.com

RAM
8GB PATRIOT DDR3 2,133MHz
patriotmemory.com

GPU
RADEON HD 7970
amd.com

PSU
CORSAIR AX860I
corsair.com

DISPLAY
DELL U2711
www.dell.com.au

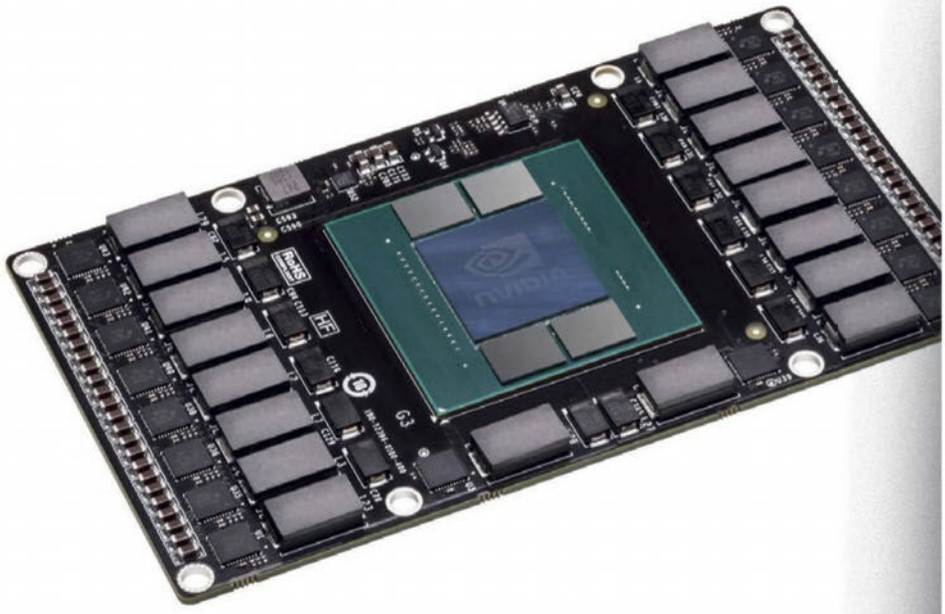


TECH OF THE YEAR 2016

Judged, compiled and written by **BENNETT RING**

It's that time of the year again, where I pour over the hundreds of products I tested last year to cherry pick the best of the best. With the release of two PC Virtual Reality headsets, a new CPU design from Intel, a raft of new GPUs and the ever-increasing speeds of storage, let's just say I've had a lot to ponder. The year ahead promises to be even more exciting, but in the meantime let's get into the thick of it and hear what we at PC PowerPlay think were the best PC gaming products of 2016.

GPU OF THE YEAR



WINNER: Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070 Mobile

URL: **WWW.NVIDIA.COM**

This is the first time I've ever awarded a laptop GPU the prestigious GPU of the year award, and it's for very good reason. Ever since gaming laptops have been around with discrete graphics chips, they've had to make do with hobbled versions of their desktop counterparts. Despite this, they've been nearly identically named, yet offered a fraction of the performance, leading to much confusion amongst potential purchasers. That all changed in 2017 when Nvidia unveiled its brand new Pascal architecture.

The desktop debut of this amazing piece of hardware was exciting already, with a huge performance boost over its prior architecture, and very cool VR acceleration features that make a massive difference when rendering two different viewports into a game scene. However, it was Nvidia's ability to deliver basically the same chipset as a mobile version that blew my mind. Overnight the gaming laptop performance paradigm shifted dramatically; no longer would mobile gamers have to make do with lowly performance, instead now gaming on an even basis as their desk-bound brethren.

Nvidia even managed to do the same with its GeForce GTX 1080 product, but the 1070 Mobile really hit the sweet spot when it came to price versus performance. It's not quite identical to the desktop GTX 1070, but the differences really are minimal. In fact, in some regards the mobile product is superior. For example, the total number of CUDA cores increased from 1920 on the desktop to 2048, helping to offset the slight frequency drops. The Base clock dropped from 1506MHz to 1443MHz, but the Boost clock was basically identical, dropping just 38MHz, from 1506MHz to 1443MHz. In the real world, that kind of drop is impossible to notice.

It came with the same chunky 8GB of GDDR5 memory, clocked at an identical 2GHz running over an identical 256-bit memory bus. It also features all of Nvidia's proprietary technologies that come with the desktop product, such as G-Sync, PhysX, Ansel, DX12 and Vulkan support and the ability to power 4K displays at 60Hz over HDMI 2.0b. It's also fully HDR ready – we just need HDR screens to catch up.

We've never had mobile GPUs that are equal to their discrete card-based cousins, but the release of Nvidia's new mobile chips changed that entirely. Now gamers know what kind of performance difference they can expect between expect between a desktop GTX 1070 and the mobile variant – basically no difference at all. So thank you Nvidia, for finally delivering desktop power to those who need to game on the go.

> "the 1070 Mobile really hit the sweet spot when it came to price versus performance"

COMMENDED: AMD Radeon RX 480

2016 was the year of VR, and AMD's approach to powering this was radically different to Nvidia's. Its goal was to target the masses, delivering products that could meet the heady demands of VR at a price point that wouldn't send your bank account into shock. At the top of this pile was the RX480, which is currently retailing for a mere $300. While the rest of your VR setup isn't exactly affordable, being able to power it all for less than $300 makes it a much more attractive proposition. While I do have concerns about how well this card will scale as VR worlds become more intricate, it did deliver what AMD promised – totally fluid VR game performance with today's existing crop of VR titles, which continues to grow at an extremely healthy rate.

MOTHERBOARD
OF THE YEAR

WINNER: Gigabyte Aorus GA-Z270X-Gaming 9

URL: **WWW.GIGABYTE.COM.AU**

Intel's new 7th Gen Core CPU wasn't anything to write to home about, but it did come with a new chipset, and the one gamers care most about is the Series 200 chipset. I reviewed over a dozen motherboards based on this chipset through the course of the year, and while the chipset itself only brought a few incremental improvements, there were so many damn impressive motherboards built around it. And taking the cake was the incredibly expensive GA-Z270X-Gaming 9, from Aorus.

You may remember Aorus as a spin-off from Gigabyte, but Gigabyte has since used the brand to represent its premium gaming products, and a premium product this board most certainly is. Priced at a staggering $849 at launch, and still retailing for over $800, it's one of the most feature-packed boards I've ever seen in my lengthy career.

It's a huge slab of PCB, using the larger E-ATX form factor to ensure there's room for quad-GPUs, even though Nvidia no longer recommends anything more than twin cards in SLI. They're all steel-reinforced to handle the weight of so many cards, while another two PCIe single lane slots are included. Not that you'll need them, as this board has basically everything you could want, built-in. I really liked the addition of eight extra PCIe lanes compared to other Z270 boards, as Gigabyte used a special PEX8747 to bump the total to 32 PCIe lanes versus 24 on other boards. This means you can run twin GPUs and multiple high-speed SSDs without having to worry about running out of PCIe lanes or USB ports; if you've bought a motherboard recently you'll have seen the mind-boggling table that shows which features suddenly stop working if you use too many SSDs, PCIe lanes or USB ports.

It also brought some of the best onboard audio I've ever had the pleasure of listening to my ears, using Creative's quad-core Sound Core3D audio processor along with a Burr-Brown DAC to deliver 120dB+ SNR audio. As usual with Gigabyte products, you can even swap out the amp to go for a different tone to the one included with the board. Full water cooling support is included in the main heatsink, along with high-Amp fan connectors for demanding water pumps. In fact, all eight fan connectors can handle most water pumps, and are all able to detect whether your fan uses PWM or Voltage to vary their speed. Throw in nine temperature sensors, and you'll be able to see exactly where things are getting a little hot. Storage speed demons will go nuts for the extreme options available. Twin U.2 connections are included alongside twin M.2 slots. Using an M.2 to U.2 convertor, it's possible to run three U.2 drives in RAID 0 mode for a claimed sequential read speed of 3525MB/sec, making this a dream machine for users of massive files.

The list of features goes on and on, but to be frank, this is the best board I've ever tested. It's also the most expensive.

COMMENDED: ASUS ROG STRIX Z270G GAMING

URL: **WWW.ASUS.COM.AU**

This mATX form factor board might have a small-ish price tag and even smaller dimensions, but it punches well above its weight class. Packing nearly all of the goodies of a full ATX board into such a small space is no mean feat, and they're all A-grade quality. To do so for just over $300 is an incredible feat, especially as it's using the most expensive Z270 chipset. If you're looking to build a mini-PC, look no further than this well-designed product.

CPU OF THE YEAR

WINNER: AMD Ryzen

URL: **WWW.AMD.COM**

Bear with me here, because the CPU of 2016 hasn't even been released yet. AMD's brand new Ryzen CPU is due to release any day now, but the mere mention of this new processor gave hope to gamers around the world. As far as gaming performance goes, CPU performance has stagnated for at least four years, when AMD simply couldn't keep up with Intel's Core CPUs. So we've had to make do with the tiniest of speed improvements from Intel each year, rarely exceeding 7% in most gaming tests.

AMD's Ryzen looks set to reignite the CPU wars in a way that we haven't seen since the days of the magnificent Athlon architecture. The latest leaked benchmarks show that the new architecture looks set to deliver on the huge promises AMD has been making about Ryzen's new Zen architecture. The company claims that these cores have experienced a huge 40% performance increase when it comes to Instructions Per Second (or IPC for short), an area where its chips have lagged well behind Intel cores for far too long. In fact, some benchmarks are showing up to a 50% performance increase, which is the kind of performance leap we haven't seen in the CPU world for over half a decade.

AMD has always offset its lower IPC performance by offering products that have more CPU cores than Intel, and has offered affordable octa-cored CPUs for many years already. Unfortunately most games don't make use of more than four-cores, so this has really only been of benefit to applications designed with multithreading in mind, such as video and image editing. The good news is that AMD will still be offering these eight-brained beasts with the new Zen architecture, so not only will we get the massive IPC increase, but we'll also get them in formats of up to 8 cores at a price that simply smashes Intel's 8-core chips. For example, rumours suggest the top of the line Ryzen R7 1800X will be priced at around US$650, yet will operate at a top speed of 4GHz. Compare that with Intel's Extreme Edition CPUs, which sell locally for $1600, and its easy to see why Ryzen is shaping up to give the CPU market the biggest shake-up we've seen in years.

> "it's easy to see why Ryzen is shaping up to give the CPU market the biggest shake-up we've seen in years"

We'll be getting our mitts on the new AMD chip in the next month or two, where we'll be able to back up these claims, but even the mere mention of this new chip has had a dramatic impact on the entire PC industry. Here's hoping it really does live up to the leaked benchmarks and prices, but all indicators suggest that it will.

COMMENDED: Nada, Zero, Zilch

Normally this is where I'd give Intel's latest CPU a mention, but to be frank the 7th Gen Core CPU was so unremarkable for gamers that I simply couldn't do so with a clear conscience. It's a great CPU for ultraportable laptops, especially when it comes to video playback, but there is absolutely no reason for gamers to upgrade to the latest CPU in Intel's stable. It simply doesn't offer any performance increases that are worthy of the price, which is why I'm leaving the Runner up CPU of the year as non-existent. Fingers-crossed this all changes with Ryzen, as Intel will finally have some real competition once again.

SSD OF THE YEAR

WINNER: Samsung 960 Pro

URL: **WWW.SAMSUNG.COM.AU**

2016 was the year when several key new PC technologies went mainstream, not least the M.2 form factor for SSDs. These drives are even smaller than a stick of RAM, but deliver up to triple the speed of ye olde SATA 6 3Gbps drives. This is because they're jacked straight into four lanes of PCIe 3.0 bandwidth.

Samsung's 960 Pro was one such drive to utilise this connection, and it also featured something else that helped boost random read/write performance through the roof – NVMe, which stands for Non-Volatile Memory Host Controller Interface Specification. This is a replacement for the old AHCI method that was used to write to the platter in mechanical drives, and is designed specifically to take advantage of the quirks of solid state memory. In the past, drives could only process a single queue of instructions, but NVMe boosts this to an incredible 65,536, which allows for a huge increase in simultaneous I/O requests.

Benchmarks showed that of all the M.2 PCIe 3.0 x4 NVMe drives on the market, Samsung's 960 Pro was arguably the fastest. With sequential read speeds in excess of 3000MB/sec and sequential write speeds of over 2000MB/sec, it was a 40% leap over the previous year's best, the Samsung 950 Pro. IOPs performance also went through the roof, hitting 440,000 read and 360,000 writes.

Meanwhile it also boosted the capacity of the drives, offering variants up to 2TB in size. Sure, you can build a full gaming PC for the same price as one of these drives, which currently retail at around $1650, but fitting so much memory into such a small space is simply amazing, and a result of Samsung's 3D V-NAND memory process.

These speeds mean your games will load faster than ever, but more noticeable is the huge boost they deliver when multitasking with different applications. Flicking between open apps and browser tabs is basically instantaneous. There is one odd thing about the new drives though; Samsung has halved the prior ten-year warranty to five years. Still, five years is an eternity in the tech world.

> you can build a full gaming PC for the same price as one of these drives

So once again, for the third year in a row, Samsung has taken out our top SSD of the year. I guess that's what happens when you control the entire manufacturing process from the top to bottom rather than sourcing bits and pieces from a myriad of companies.

COMMENDED: Samsung 950 Pro 256GB

URL: **WWW.SAMSUNG.COM.AU**

If you want the speed boost of a top-shelf SSD but don't have the bank account of BHP, this 2015 drive can now be had for extremely affordable prices, starting at just over $230. 256GB mightn't sound like enough, but it's plenty for your Operating System and a handful of your favourite games. Best of all it delivers performance that still wipes the floor with most other similarly-priced drives.

MOUSE OF THE YEAR

WINNER: Thermaltake Level 10M Advanced

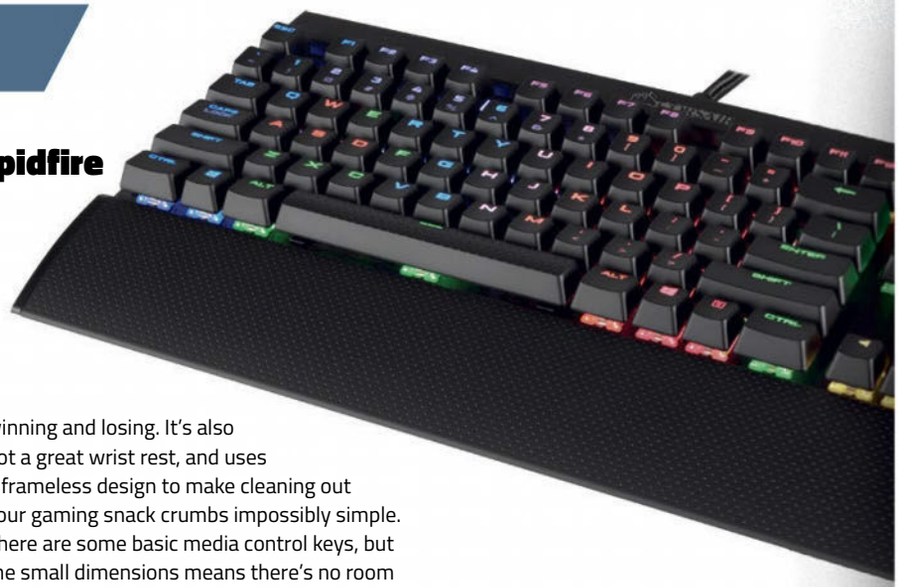
WWW.THERMALTAKE.COM.AU

The thing about most mice is that you really don't know if you're going to like them until you try them, which is next to impossible for most of us. This is where the Level 10M Advanced adjustable height will come in handy, as you can lower or raise the rear to best fit the style of grip you use.

The design is definitely controversial; you'll either love or hate its rather strange aesthetic. Yet it's very comfortable to use over time, and the honeycomb finish allows for your palms to remain sweat-free. One of my favourite features is the five-axis thumb stick, which can be programmed with any macro you can think of. It's perfect for changing weapons or spells, or whatever else you think you might need. There's also plenty of other buttons within easy reach, and the Omron left/right buttons feel just right. The 16000 DPI AVAGO 9500 laser sensor is incredibly accurate without having the acceleration issues we've seen on other laser mice, though it's unlikely you'll ever use it at 16000 DPI; thankfully you can change this easily enough on the fly via the DPI buttons.

Being a Thermaltake product, it's also obviously got more RGB lights than a Christmas tree, and controlling both these and the macros is a cinch via the intuitive software included. At less than $90, it also happens to be damn good value. What's not to like?

KEYBOARD OF THE YEAR



WINNER: Corsair K70 RGB Rapidfire

WWW.CORSAIR.COM/EN-AU

There are a couple of key hardware categories that are utterly flooded with competing products from a myriad of companies: keyboards, mice and headsets. This makes picking a clear winner rather hard, especially with keyboards, as the best all use Cherry MX switches, making them rather similar in use. However, it's Corsair's extremely close relationship with Cherry that saw the Corsair K70 Rapidfire becoming our pick of the year.

This is because it was the first company to make use of Cherry's brand new Speed switches. Compared to other switches, they have a travel distance of just 1.2mm versus the 2mm of other switches. This means you can activate a keypress up to 40% faster than competing products, and as we all know, a rapid response is often the difference between winning and losing. It's also got a great wrist rest, and uses a frameless design to make cleaning out your gaming snack crumbs impossibly simple. There are some basic media control keys, but the small dimensions means there's no room for dedicated macro keys. As expected, it's got full RGB lighting per key, so you can make it as dazzling or dim as you like; myself, I'm happy with a nice low red glow. It's not the cheapest board around, at $180 or so, but the speed with which I can type and game makes that premium easy enough to justify.

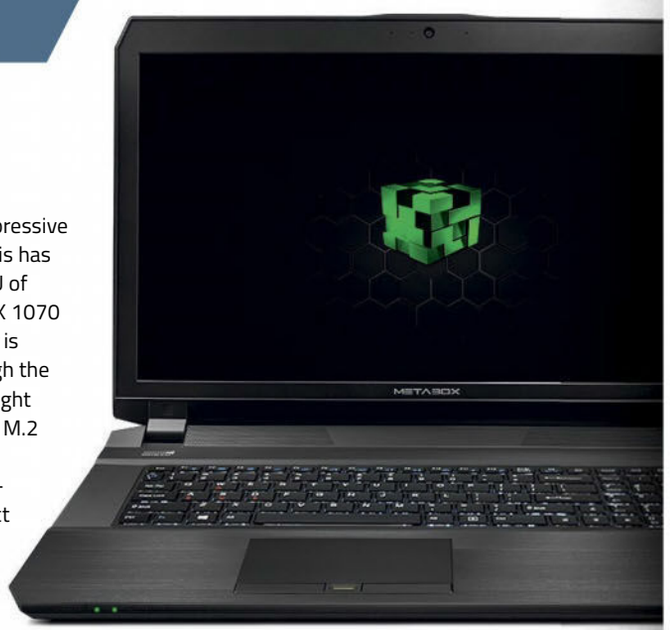
CASE
OF THE YEAR

WINNER: Corsair 460X Crystal
WWW.CORSAIR.COM/EN-AU

As I type this article, Corsair's 460X Crystal case sits next to me on my flatmate's desk – it was such a beauty that he had to build his latest gaming rig inside it. Not only did it have a beautiful interior that was highly customizable in terms of radiator placement and drive cage mobility, it's the case's stunning exterior that really makes it shine. The front and left panels are made entirely from tempered glass, but it's got a smoky finish that doesn't make your RGB lights overwhelm your gaming space. The triple RGB fans at the front can be customized to match your room's colour-scheme, and these are controlled via three buttons on the top. Clever cable-hiding behind the motherboard mount makes it easy to keep everything clean and uncluttered inside. There's also a nice PSU and drive shroud that hides these ugly components from prying eyes, while the fully tool-less design is a Corsair standard that has been around for years.

The rest of the case is built entirely from steel, forgoing the crack-worthy plastic that many other cases rely upon. Despite being able to handle a full ATX board, multiple GPUs and large radiators, it's actually a rather small case, so won't hog up precious groundspace in your gaming den. Best of all it's a steal considering the overall quality that you're getting, at just $165. Nice one, Corsair.

GAMING LAPTOP
OF THE YEAR



WINNER: Metabox P670RS-G
WWW.METABOX.COM.AU

It's nice to give our gaming laptop of the year award to an Aussie company. The Metabox P670RS-G was an absolutel shoe-in for this award, as it simply ticked all the right boxes. It's on the larger end of the spectrum, based around a 17.3-inch screen, which just happens to be G-synch enabled. It only tops out at 60Hz, but that's fine for the majority of gamers who haven't gotten used to 100Hz+ screens.

The all-alloy construction means it only weighs just over 3kg while remaining super sturdy, and the subtle black design doesn't scream "I'm gaming!" when you're having a sneaky round of Overwatch in the office. But it's the hardware inside combined with an incredible price that simply blew my mind. Intel's i7-6700HQ is a beast for gaming, with its quad-cores peaking out at 3.5GHz under maximum load. More impressive though is the fact that this has been paired with our GPU of the year, the GeForce GTX 1070 Mobile. 16GB of memory is more than enough, though the storage is a little on the light end, with a single 240GB M.2 SATA.

These are all very high-end specs which I'd expect to cost in excess of three grand for. So to see this on sale for just $2,449 simply gave me no choice – if you're looking for the best gaming laptop around that won't cost the Earth, the Metabox P670RS-G was my pick for 2016.

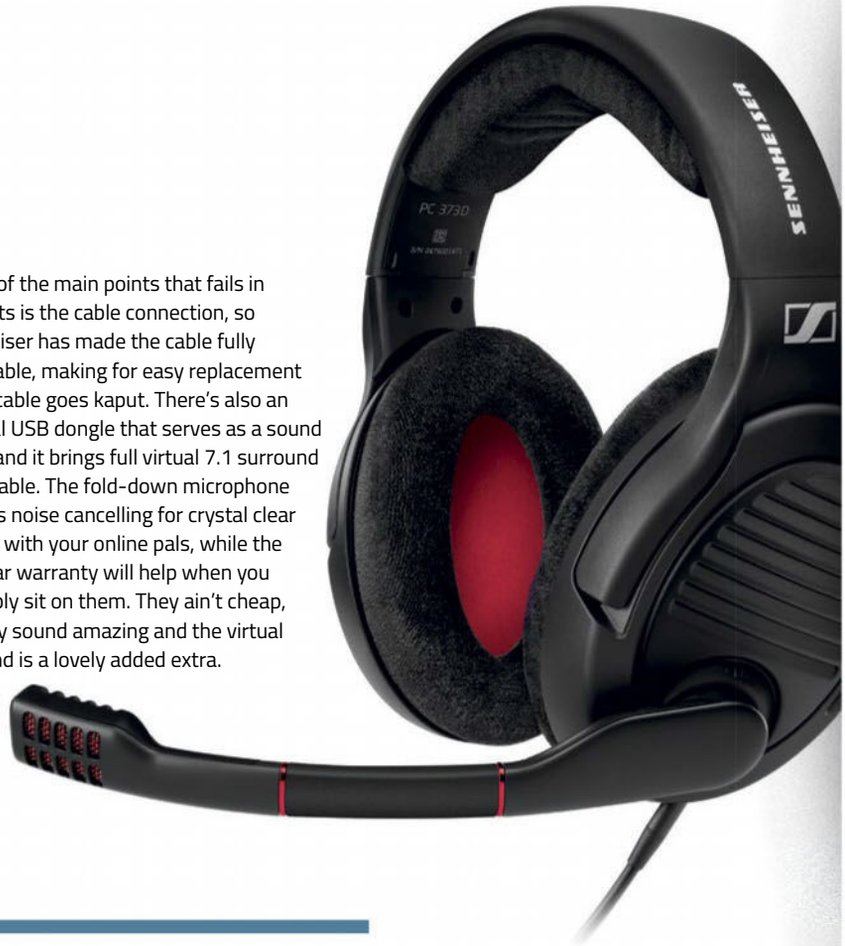
HEADSET OF THE YEAR

WINNER: Sennheiser PC 373D

EN-AU.SENNHEISER.COM

Yes, these are $400 headphones, which many will balk at. But there's a good reason they're so darn expensive; they absolutely rock. It's not just the Sennheiser-renowned audio quality, with rich bass, crystal clear high notes and a warm mid-range, which shows no distortion despite being cranked to Tinnitus-causing volume levels. They're also extremely light, making them super comfortable over extended gaming sessions. This is because they appear to be built entirely from plastic, yet I was able to flex the headband through almost 180 degrees before starting to worry that something might go *snap*. The circumaural earcup design means you don't get that painful sensation that on-ear cans can give over time, and the velvet plush finish extremely cozy. They've also got ventilation grills to keep that sweaty sensation at bay.

One of the main points that fails in headsets is the cable connection, so Sennheiser has made the cable fully detachable, making for easy replacement if your cable goes kaput. There's also an external USB dongle that serves as a sound codec, and it brings full virtual 7.1 surround to the table. The fold-down microphone includes noise cancelling for crystal clear comms with your online pals, while the two year warranty will help when you inevitably sit on them. They ain't cheap, but they sound amazing and the virtual surround is a lovely added extra.

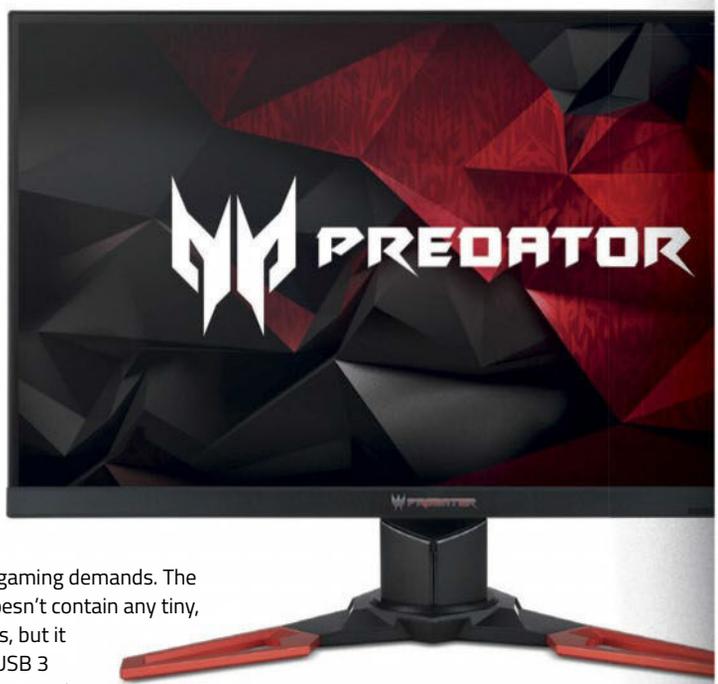


MONITOR OF THE YEAR

WINNER: Acer Predator XB1 XB271HU

WWW.CORSAIR.COM/EN-AU

Last year we awarded Monitor of the Year to a category of monitors as a whole, singling out Adaptive Sync as the be all and end all. It would be easy to take that step again for the best monitor of 2016 given the huge number of great monitors released this year, but if we have to choose one from the pack it would have to be the Acer Predator XB1 XB271HU. This 27" 1440p beauty offers some of the best bang for your buck when it comes to performance, build quality and features. For around $1000 you get a crisp 2560x1440 IPS panel with a native refresh rate of 144Hz. Sure, there are now other 27" monitors with higher native refresh rates, but if you can clock 144Hz on a 27" display you're probably going to be in the market for something bigger with a higher resolution. The refresh rate of the XB1 can be overclocked to 165Hz if needed and the Gsync hardware means your Nvidia card can crank out as many frames as the monitor can handle. Add in ULMB (Ultra Low Motion Blur) and you have a bright, crisp panel that is more than able to keep up with your gaming demands. The monitor thankfully doesn't contain any tiny, tinny built-in speakers, but it does also boast two USB 3 ports in the base. It may not be the biggest or most powerful monitor of the year, but for our money it's definitely the best all-round.



COOLEST PC TECH
OF THE YEAR

WINNER: HTC Vive
WWW.HTC.COM/AU/VIRTUAL-REALITY

If there was one piece of PC Gaming technology of the year that dominated my world, it had to be HTC's Vive Virtual Reality kit. I became a long-time dreamer of the potential of VR after playing with the terrible arcade kits in the '90s; even though they sucked, they hinted at the potential of what was to come. I didn't realise it would take another 20 years for my dreams to become a reality, but the moment I pulled down the Vive headset and was transported into another world like no game had ever done, I knew we were on the verge of something incredibly exciting.

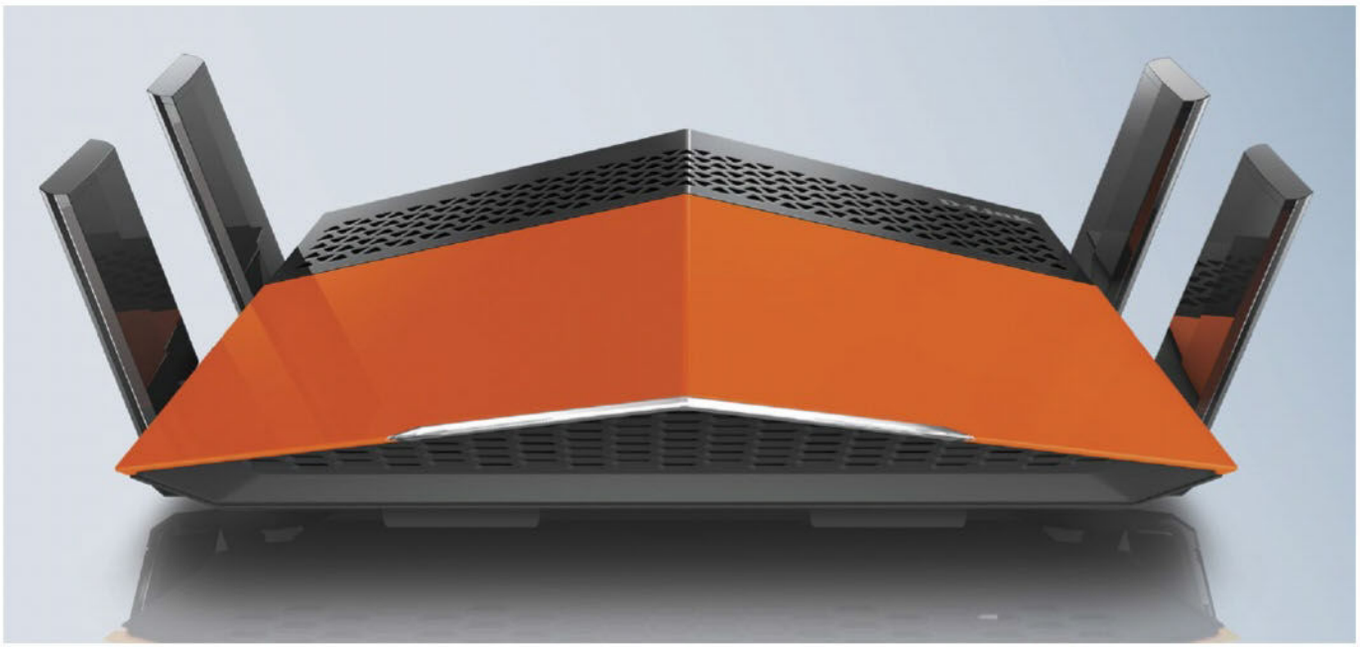
Don't get me wrong, there are still huge challenges facing VR. Even the mightily expensive Vive has some rather big issues. It's bulky, you're chained to your PC via a long tether, and the resolution is pretty average, making it easy to see pixels in a world where we're accustomed to Retina and 4K displays. Then there's the problem of setting aside a play area that realistically should be around 2.5m by 2.5m as an absolute minimum. There's also the area of software; building a game for VR is so dramatically different to any other genre, that most of the current experiences feel more like experiments than fully-fledged games.

And yet... no game has ever truly encapsulated the feeling of being transported into another world like my experiences with the Vive. The Rift almost delivers as good an experience, but its lack of motion controls and room-scale gameplay definitely makes it the lesser of the two kits (though my Oculus Touch controllers are in the mail – stay tuned for my review in the near future).

> "no game has ever truly encapsulated the feeling of being transported into another world like the Vive"

Prior to Vive being released, I knew a hell of a lot of VR sceptics, which is surprising when so many of my associates are technology journalists. To see the huge grin on their face after just an hour or two with the device, and to hear their opinions do a 180 degree turn in such a short term, indicates to me that VR really does have the potential to take over gaming as we know it.

Sure, there will still be a few folks who suffer from nausea or who have eyesight issues which could prevent them from experiencing it properly, but I do believe that VR is here to stay. I highly doubt it will be in the form in which it currently exists, replacing bulky headsets with retinal projectors (which seems to be what the highly secretive Magic Leap project is working on), or using electronic stimulation to fool our brains into thinking we're moving to overcome motion sickness, but I can't wait to see what comes next. It's an incredible time to be a gamer with VR now proving to be possible, and that's just the start, with the technology having far-reaching implications that go well beyond blasting virtual soldiers. Truth be told though, I'm happy to simply use it for entertainment...



WIFI

D-Link EXO DIR-879 AC1900 Wi-Fi Router

Light on features

PRICE $279
www.dlink.com.au

D-Link usually sends us the most cutting-edge, high-end routers it's got. They're usually very expensive, look like an alien drone from Independence Day, and have had a few issues MU-MIMO support of late. The DIR-879 is an entirely different beast; it's the first mid-range router we've tested from the company, well below the price of previous D-Link routers we've reviewed. And yet to call it affordable is definitely a stretch given its feature set.

This is a dual band router, running both a 2.4GHz and 5GHz network, hence the AC1900 designation in the model name. The 2.4GHz network delivers a theoretical maximum speed of 600Mbps, while the 5GHz network pumps out a theoretical maximum of 1300Mbps. We must emphasise the word theoretical here, because routers are incredibly prone to exaggerated performance figures. Their performance varies wildly based on distance, devices, other Wi-Fi networks and even its proximity to your microwave or cordless phone.

The design retains D-Link's eye-catching robotic spider aesthetics, but they've gone for a bold orange instead of the usual red. Four movable antennae can be extended, but they're not directional. At the rear are your standard four Ethernet ports, single WAN port, yet strangely lacking is any USB port. This is a basic feature on routers of this price, allowing for network printing or basic network attached storage, so its absence is baffling.

The chipset used within is the RTL8198CS dual-core chip that operates at 1GHz paired, with 256MB of memory. The interface is extremely basic, so serious network nerds will find it lacking, but for most of us it does the job, and is relatively snappy and responsive while doing so. Gamers might find the maximum of 24 port forwards an issue though, as they'll easily be filled with just a handful of games, which often require up to four or five of these fields per game.

When it came time to test performance, the router posted some respectable speeds. On the 5GHz network we pinged a speed of 401Mbps at a range of 10 metres, while the 2.4GHz network dropped this down to 176Mbps. Given that this tester has just moved house, and is now facing an entirely different range of competing networks and conditions, it's impossible to say how it fairs against other routers, but a bit of research shows it's around the higher end of the pack for routers in the $250 to $300 price range.

> "the interface is extremely basic, so serious network nerds will find it lacking, but for most of us it does the job"

That's on par with other routers in this price range, although you can pick up Billion models for around $50 less that are just as fast, but come with much deeper tweaking options. They also have a USB port that enables much more functionality. *BENNETT RING* PC

- Solid performance
- Easy interface

- Limited feature-set
- Low port forwarding total

VERDICT:

It's by no means a bad product; there are just better value offerings that do a whole lot more.

6

Asus ROG GR8 II PC Benchmarks

Min FPS Avg FPS Score

GRID AUTOSPORT

ULTRA DETAIL

	Min FPS	Avg FPS
1920 x 1080	109	137
2560 x 1440	84	101

SHADOW OF MORDOR

ULTRA DETAIL

	Min FPS	Avg FPS
1920 x 1080	57	141
3840 x 2160	23	30

3DMARK Firestrike Extreme

2560 X 1440

	Score
ROG GR8 II	5429

3DMARK Firestrike

1920 X 1080

	Score
ROG GR8 II	10192

SYSTEM

Asus ROG GR8 II Desktop Gaming PC

A mini-PC with respectable performance

PRICE $2199
www.asus.com.au

It seems that mini-PCs are all the rage at the moment, with Intel and Nvidia's latest products allowing PC builders to fit more powerful components into smaller cases thanks to their increased energy efficiency. The Asus ROG GR8 II is the latest, and measures smaller than a standard PS4 console, with an interior capacity of just four litres.

Unfortunately you won't be able to lay it horizontally under your TV, as it's designed to stand upright. You could lay it down but this will play havoc with the specially designed cooling system, which sucks in cool air from the bottom and expels it from the top and rear. Even when in an upright position it's still rather noisy, peaking out at 51dB while playing Grid Autosport.

The chassis is built entirely from plastic, and has the standard twin USB and mic in/headphone out ports on the front. At the rear you'll find another three USB Type C ports; twin USB 3.0 and one 3.1. There's also the obligatory USB 3.1 Type C connector found on most motherboards, but the twin HDMI 2.0 ports are a nice surprise. There's also DP 1.4 if you'd prefer. A single Gigabit Ethernet port provides cabled connectivity, while the built-in 802.11ac Wi-Fi is ready for your wireless network.

Residing inside is a relatively potent combination of hardware. Intel's new 7th Gen Core i7-7700 CPU has four HyperThreaded enabled cores, which crank up to a beefy 4.2GHz, all while maxing out at a mere 65W TDP. This is slight overkill when compared to the GPU though, which is a custom Asus GeForce GTX 1060. We saw this issue recently with an MSI pre-built system, where we'd much prefer a slightly slower CPU in return for a GeForce GTX 1070 GPU. 16GB of DDR4 memory comes as standard, while the 256GB M.2 SSD is rather piddling for a system of this price. As our benchmarks indicate, this machine is fine for 1080p gaming, and even 1440p on older titles. However, don't even think about trying 4K; as you can see from our Shadow of Mordor benchmark it slowed to a crawl.

It's nice to see such a small PC delivering respectable performance, but it is rather expensive when you compare it to a DIY build in a bigger case. It's also rather noisy, which will be annoying in a living room environment, where headphones aren't likely to be used. Ultimately your decision to purchase will come down to the small size and whether or not you'd rather build your own. *BENNETT RING* PC

> "we'd much prefer a slightly slower CPU in return for a GeForce GTX 1070 GPU"

- Very small form factor
- Respectable performance
- Twin HDMI

- Overpowered CPU compared to the GPU
- Expensive
- Noisy

VERDICT:

As with all pre-builds, you can DIY for considerably cheaper, but you'll lose out on the excellent two year warranty if anything goes wrong.

7

MSI GE72 Apache Pro Benchmarks

Min FPS Avg FPS Score

GRID AUTOSPORT

ULTRA DETAIL

1920 x 1080	83	101

3DMARK Firestrike Extreme

2560 X 1440

MSI GE72 Apache Pro	3632

3DMARK Firestrike

1920 X 1080

MSI GE72 Apache Pro	6937

LAPTOP

MSI GE72RE-074AU Apache Pro Gaming Laptop

The GTX 1050Ti hits the laptop

PRICE $2,199
www.msi.com

NVIDIA's Pascal architecture has totally revolutionised the gaming laptop world. In the past, laptop owners would buy a machine with a GPU that had a nearly identical name to a desktop GPU, but the chip itself would be totally different. Pascal has changed all that, with the desktop and mobile GPUs basically identical, giving mobile gamers real desktop performance for the first time ever. We've checked out the mobile GeForce GTX 1080, 1070 and 1060; now it's time to take a peek at the GeForce GTX 1050 Ti powered MSI GE72 Apache Pro.

As a relatively affordable laptop, there's an odd mix of hardware within, but first let's look at the exterior. The 17.3-inch screen means it's quite a slab, yet doesn't weigh too much, at 2.7kg. The screen is a standard 1920 x 1080 panel with no touch capability, but it does run at 120Hz. It seems to be based on TN technology, as the viewing angles aren't spectacular, but the pay-off is that super fast refresh rate. Strangely it's not G-sync compatible, which is relatively simple to include in high-speed laptop panels.

The Steelseries keyboard is extremely comfortable to use, and is emblazoned with the usual RGB madness. The touchpad isn't so great though; it's got a rough surface which can see the mouse cursor unexpectedly jump, but most gamers will be using a mouse so it's no biggie. A DVD multi-drive is included, while the onboard speakers are rather average. Thankfully plugging in headphones delivers excellent audio thanks to the Nahimic audio system.

It's on the inside that things get a little confusing. The GTX 1050Ti is basically the entry level for Nvidia's mobile GPUs, yet it runs at 16% faster than the desktop part... provided the laptop maker gives it good enough cooling.

So why has MSI paired this entry-level GPU with the top of the line Intel 7th Gen i7-7700HQ, a quad-core HT chip that Turbos up to 3.8GHz? It simply feels like an unbalanced matchup. There's also 16GB of DDR4, a single 128GB SSD and another 1TB drive. Our benchmarks show this is fine for 1080p gaming, but anything more is a bit of a stretch.

> "our benchmarks show this is fine for 1080p gaming, but anything more is a bit of a stretch"

With competing laptops like Gigabyte's P55W v7 packing a slightly slower CPU but with a GTX 1060 for basically the same price, and offering a significant overall performance increase, we have to scratch our heads as to why MSI paired one of the fastest mobile CPUs with the GTX 1050Ti. It simply doesn't make a lot of sense to us.

BENNETT RING PC

- Fast CPU
- 120Hz display
- Good amount of storage

- Mis-matched CPU and GPU
- Expensive compared to 1060 laptops

VERDICT:

Gaming relies more on GPU than CPU, so to see MSI use the odd combination here is a bit of blunder.

7

GeForce GTX 1080 Aorus xtreme 8G Benchmarks

Avg FPS Score

HITMAN

4K, ULTRA

Founders Ed. 1080	49
Aorus xtreme ed. 8G	51

THE DIVISION

4K, ULTRA

Founders Ed. 1080	45
Aorus xtreme ed. 8G	47

3DMARK Firestrike

1080P

Founders Ed. 1080	17656
Aorus xtreme ed. 8G	17995

4K

Founders Ed. 1080	4998
Aorus xtreme ed. 8G	5092

GPU

GeForce GTX 1080 Aorus xtreme edition 8G

Pay more for just a little extra performance

PRICE $1149
www.aorus.com

While we're all waiting with bated breath for Nvidia's GeForce GTX 1080 Ti, which will inevitably be timed to spoil AMD's Vega launch, we're still more than happy with the supreme performance offered by its existing Pascal-based GeForce GTX 1080 GPU. Now that this chip has been on the market for some time, we're starting to see rather more exotic graphics cards based on this chip, and the latest is the Gigabyte GeForce GTX 1080 Aorus xtreme edition 8G. Let's check out what that commanding price delivers.

You're probably going to need a graphics card bracket, or steel-reinforced PCIe physical lanes, as this is one heavy sucker. We don't have the actual weight, but it feels like a solid four kilograms or more. The rear I/O plate will occupy dual slots, but the added height of the cooler will wipe out a third on the interior. As well as the triple DP 1.4 ports, single HDMI 2.0b and Dual-link DVI-D port on the rear, we love the double HDMI 2.0b ports that Aorus has mounted at the front of the card. This makes it super simple to set up front HDMI 2.0b ports on your case, perfect for VR users. As far as we know, Aorus is the only company to currently offer this feature.

A triple fan cooler uses twin fans nestled above a third fan, ensuring 100% coverage of all the steamy bits. There's also additional copper cooling on the backplate, as well as the usual copper plate over the GPU and memory. As expected for a premium product, premium capacitors have been used, while the power phase system has been beefed up to a 12+2 system versus the reference product's 8+2. This is why it has twin 8-pin power plugs included.

The added power and cooling has enabled Aorus to give the GPU a kick in the pants. The base speed has increased from the default of 1607MHz to 1785MHz in OC mode, while Boost Speed increases from 1733MHz to 1936MHz. Even the memory has been tweaked, from 2500MHz to 2600MHz. In real world use, this resulted in a stable Boost speed of 2135MHz, the fastest we've seen yet in a GTX 1080. As our benchmarks show, this isn't a massive increase in real world performance, but we did notice how quiet the cooler was, hitting just 34dB on our sound meter, a single dB lower than the Founder's edition.

While the extra performance, twin HDMI front-facing ports and excellent cooling is appreciated, there's no

> "you're probably going to need a bracket, or steel-reinforced PCIe physical lanes, as this is one heavy sucker"

getting around the fact that this card is around $300 more expensive than the most affordable GeForce GTX 1080 cards, such as the Gigabyte GTX1080 OC 8GB, which can now be had for a mere (**cough!* - Ed.*) $819. Paying almost 40% extra for a couple of percent extra in performance simply can't be justified for most of us, though we're guessing extreme overclockers will be able to extract world-record beating performance out of this product.
BENNETT RING PC

- Powerful yet quiet
- Twin front-facing HDMI 2.0b ports
- Fastest 1080 Boost

- Very expensive
- Real world speed benefits aren't massive

VERDICT:

At almost 40% more expensive for a mere 2% to 3% performance increase is simply bad maths.

7

INPUT

Razer Blackwidow Chroma V2

Not an evil clone of Natasha Romanova

PRICE $299
www.razerzone.com

The Blackwidow Chroma V2 is an interative upgrade of the original Blackwidow Chroma, but the combination of these upgrades and the choice between three different switches makes the Blackwidow Chroma V2 an excellent premium mechanical keyboard. Whereas the original Blackwidow was limited to the clicky Green switches, the V2 can feature any of the Razer switches. We were sent two units to test, one with Green switches and one with the new Yellow switches. Both are excellent, but the new Yellow switches are a real standout.

The new Yellow switches are linear and feature a short throw, similar to those seen in Cherry Speed switches, Romer-G or Steelseries GS1. The actuation point of the keys is only 1.2mm, and this, combined with the 45g actuation force makes the switch feel very fast. The short actuation and light touch takes a little getting used to – you can expect quite a few miskeys during the learning curve, especially with the extremely light Caps Lock – but after that learning experience your fingers will fly across the keys.

The V2 has a bigger footprint than the original Blackwidow thanks both to a row of dedicated macro keys and one of the nicest cushioned wrist rests we've ever seen. The rest is a very elegant piece of design – rather than using clips, it attaches via magnets, snapping into place as soon as the rest touches the keyboard. The keyboard also hosts some nice bright RGBs, a USB passthrough and headphone jack. It's a compelling, albeit rather pricey package. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

- Yellow keys are great
- Excellent design
- Wrist rest

- Learning curve
- Expensive

VERDICT:

The Blackwidow Chroma V2 is an excellent premium keyboard. It's expensive, but worth the price.

9

INPUT

Corsair K95 Platinum RGB

A new gaming flagship

PRICE $349
www.corsair.com

Corsair makes excellent mechanical keyboards. Of this there can be no doubt, but with the new flagship keyboard, the K95 Platinum RGB, Corsair has outdone themselves and created one of the best keyboards we've seen in a long while thanks to a combination of solid construction, easily accessible controls, Cherry MX Speed switches and an excellent wrist rest. Unfortunately such excellent design and performance comes with a hefty price tag, and when stacked up against some of Corsair's other excellent keyboards the value of the K95 Platinum RGB comes into question.

The design of the K95 Platinum differs from its similarly numbered predecessor in one significant way. Rather than having a whopping 18 macro buttons to the left of the keyboard, the Platinum only has space for a single column of six. This greatly reduces the footprint of the keyboard without sacrificing much of the usability, thanks to easy macro programming and 8mb of built-in memory for profiles and macros. Unlike most other Corsair keyboards, the Platinum comes with a choice of only two switches – Speed or Brown, both of which are excellent. We opted to review the Speed switch version, but the Brown switches are a PCPP favourite.

Aside from the very high price tag, the only other gripes with the K95 platinum are minor. The CUE (Corsair Utility Engine) drivers aren't nearly as user friendly as some competing drivers, and the dual sided magnetic rubber pad on the wrist rest is prone to picking up every crumb, stray hair or other piece of detritus it can. *DANIEL WILKS* PC

- Aluminium body
- Speed switches
- Comfortable and fast

- Stonkingly expensive
- Crumb magnet

VERDICT:

An excellent, impeccably made keyboard that is just a little too expensive at the moment.

9

Mechanical Switches

What makes a mechanical switch mechanical?

There are two common kinds of switch on the market – mechanical and rubber dome. Rubber dome keyboards hold the lower end of the price spectrum, and consist of a rubber sheet over a PCB. Keycaps on sliders depress the rubber domes over the PCB to offer some type of feedback or resistance for every keystroke. Mechanical keyboards, on the other hand, have individual key switches for each key.

Different makes, models and brands of mechanical switches have different components in a finished switch, but all contain some core components.

Keycap: The plastic or metal top of a switch. This is the part you press.

Stem: The part the keycap is mounted on. While some manufacturers have proprietary connectors for their keycaps (Topre, Logitech, Steelseries), many use the same connector enabling users to freely switch out keycaps (Cherry, Kailh, Greentech, KTB, Gateron, TTC).

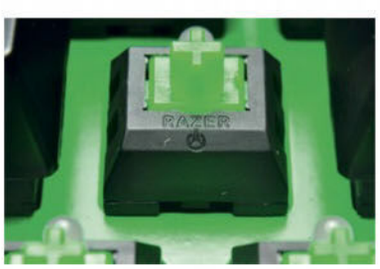
Slider: The slider is the part that pushes against the spring and interrupts the contacts.

Housing: The case that holds all of the components. The individual housing of switches makes them simple to replace on many keyboards.

Contacts: These contacts register a key press. On most keys (there are a few exceptions), these contacts are held apart when the key's in its neutral position and come together when the switch reaches its actuation point, usually around half way down the switches throw distance.

Spring: The spring compresses during a keystroke, providing resistance and sending the key back to its neutral position after it is released.

Mechanical switches are broken into three basic types.



▲ **Razer Green is the only type of clicky key specifically designed for gaming.**

Linear - these switches travel up and down smoothly and consistently. Common linear switches include Cherry Red, Cherry Black, Kailh Red, Steelseries QS1 and Razer Yellow.

Tactile – tactile switches include a tactile bump at the switches actuation point to give feedback when a key is pressed. This bump usually comes across as a brief moment of increased resistance against the stroke. Tactile keys can be considered something of a middle ground between linear and clicky keys. Common tactile keys include Cherry Brown, Razer Orange and Logitech Romer-G.

Clicky – although primarily designed for typing, clicky keys have proven very popular in the gaming market. These switches produce a loud click as well as a tactile bump when they reach the actuation point. An unfortunate side effect of the design of the keys is something called hysteresis. This means that the actuation point and the reset point of the switch are misaligned,

> "different makes, models and brands of mechanical switches all contain some core components"

meaning the switch has to rebound higher than tactile or linear keys to reset for another actuation. While this isn't a problem when it comes to typing it can be problematic when spamming keys in a game. The most common clicky switches are the Cherry Blue, Kailh Blue and Razer Green. The Razer Green keys stand out as the only clicky keys specifically made for gaming. This was achieved by shortening the distance between the actuation and reset points to 0.4mm.

Some terms you should know:

Actuation force: The amount of pressure in grams needed to depress a key. Most mechanical switches have an actuation force ranging between 35g and 60g. Spacebars usually have an actuation force higher than the rest of the keyboard, with an actuation of around 80g.

▲ **Linear switches like Cherry Black travel smoothly.**

Actuation Point: The distance a switch must travel to actuate. Most common keys have an actuation point around 2mm, though some new "speed" style switches cut this distance down to 1.2mm or so.

Reset Point: The point at which the key breaks the contacts ending the connection.

Travel: The total distance a key can be depressed. For most common switches the travel is 4mm, though some new switches have a travel of 3mm or less.

Key Polling Rate: While some large numbers look good on the back of a box, the key polling rate is by and large a useless metric, as even the fastest typist in the world wouldn't be able to tell the difference between polling settings.

Anti-Ghosting: This term is sometimes used in reference to Key Rollover but it is actually a different phenomenon. Ghosting occurs when multiple keys are hit simultaneously but a key that wasn't hit registers. Due to the rather open definition of Anti-Ghosting it can mean different things to different manufacturers.

N-Key Rollover: Each key is scanned independently, so no matter how many keys are depressed at one time each is detected accurately. PC

▶ **Inside the Logitech Romer-G, showing how it all fits together.**

HOTWARE 260

with Terrence Jarrad

01

01 Blackpods

$150+ ▪ Blackpods

blackpods.store

So you want Airpods for your iPhone 7, but you bought the black iPhone, and Apple only make white Airpods and they totally don't match hash tag first world problems. What to do? Hit up Blackpods.

POWERED UP: Send in your own Airpods, and Blackpods will black 'em up for you with a special scratch resistant coating. Alternatively if you don't have Airpods already, you can buy a pre-blackened set.

PLAYED OUT: Airpods are still entirely ridiculous the end.

02

02 Brilliant Smart Home Control

$200+ ▪ Brilliant

www.brilliant.tech

We've seen the automated future of technology doing things like this for decades, and it turns out the automated future is here now.

POWERED UP: Connects to and controls audio devices like those from Sonos and climate systems like Nest. It has Alexa built in, allows multi-room video communication, and of course can control smart lighting systems. It can also be activated with touch or voice commands.

PLAYED OUT: If you're one of those people who thinks getting LED lights installed is a bit too much work, then making your house "smart" with something like this is way out of your league. Will cost a bucket to kit out every room.

03

03 Ping GPS Locator

$150 ▪ Ping

pinggps.com

About the size of a Tile, the Ping GPS locator is the device you need to keep tabs on portable things that typically roam outside the effective range of a Tile – like your child, or the cat you dress like a child and which secretly hates you for it.

POWERED UP: It's waterproof, rechargeable, has a panic button function and can be located around the globe using a combination of Bluetooth, mobile networks, and GPS.

04

04 Retroblox

$TBA ▪ Retroblox

retroblox.com

Like playing and/or streaming retro games? Retroblox may have the console for you.

POWERED UP: Stores games played on cartridge or CD, upscales them to HD, and allows you to share video or screenshots to social media channels, as well has enabling streaming through Twitch. Retro support for CD-based systems like PSX, Sega CD, TurboGrafx-CD through the built-in optical drive, and the likes of NES cartridges via "Element Modules".

PLAYED OUT: Plans to be crowd funded this year, so may not become a reality for consumers. Modular nature could be expensive, depending on the number of add-ons you require.

05

05 Gita Cargo-Bot

$TBA ▪ PFF

gita.piaggiofastforward.com

If you've ever thought it would be cool to be like Discworld's Rincewind, with Luggage following you everywhere, then we have the robot for you, thanks to Vespa-makers Piaggio.

POWERED UP: Capable of carrying around 18kg, it has autonomous movement to match your walk/run/ride speed (up to 35km/h), to follow wherever you need to go. It's also designed to move to a schedule along pre-planned routes, so you could send it to Bunnings for a sausage without worrying about drone flight restrictions.

PLAYED OUT: Unlike Discworld's Luggage, it won't eat would-be assailants. Yet.

PLAYED OUT: Runs on a data plan that'll hit for around $60 after the first year.

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INVENTORY

THE BEST BUILD FOR EVERY BUDGET

With the release of Ryzen, new Inventory machines are definitely on the way. The price/performance balance on the new chips looks amazing. As soon as we've tested them, we'll know how the new builds will take shape.

MODEM ROUTERS

For all rational budgets

BUDGET

TP-Link VR600
$179 *tp-link.com*
Not the fastest, but it's stable, well priced and feature packed. ADSL modem built in

Synology Router RT1900ac
$199 *synology.com*
No built in ADSL modem, but it's fast and has the best interface around

PREMIUM

NETGEAR R8000 Nighthawk X6 Tri-Band WiFi Router
$300 *netgear.com.au*

Formerly our pick for the Beast, this router is more than powerful and fast enough for all your gaming needs

LAPTOPS

Gaming on the go

BUDGET

Gigabyte P55W v5
$2099 *gigabyte.com.au*
If you want real gaming performance in a laptop, $2k is where it starts

PREMIUM

Metabox Prime-X
$6899 *metabox.com.au*
The fastest laptop around costs big

BUDGET

The perfect entry-level gaming PC

CPU

AMD FX-6300 6 Core Black Edition Processor
$155 *amd.com*
AMD still has the punch to compete in the budget range

MOBO

Asrock 970-PR03 R2.0 Motherboard
$109 *asrock.com.au*
A cheap home for AMD's cheap gaming CPU

RAM

G.Skill-NT 8GB Single DDR3 1600
$45 *gskill.com*
8GB is plenty for our entry-level rig

VIDEO

Asus GTX 1050 Dual Edition
$219 *asus.com.au*
The best price/power conversion around

POWER

Cooler Master Thunder 500W
$59 *coolermaster.com*
The budget beast doesn't need a lot of juice

SOUND

Cougar Immersa
$59 *cougargaming.com*
Incredible performance and comfort for a shoestring price

STORAGE

1TB 7200RPM HDD (any) $63
The cheapest 1Tb drive should house a good 50 games

DISPLAY

AOC e2450Swh LED Monitor
$179 *aocmonitorap.com/anz*
24" and 2ms response for under $200?

CASE

NZXT S340
$97 *NZXT.com*
Beauty on a real budget

KEYBOARD

Tt eSPORTS Challenger
$55 *thermaltake.com.au*
Built for PC gamers – macros, shortcuts, the lot

MOUSE

Rapoo V20 Optical Gaming Mouse
$35 *rapoo.com*
The disco mouse is a pleasure to use and looks great

TOTAL: **$1,055**

PERFORMANCE

Most bells and whistles, without breaking the bank

CPU

Intel 5th Generation Core i5-6600K + Noctua NH-D15
$365 + $115 *intel.com*

MOBO

Asus Z170 Pro Gaming
$259 *asus.com.au*
Our fave affordable Z170 board

RAM

HyperX HX421C14FB2K2 16GB DDR4 2133MHz
$101 *hyperxgaming.com*
16GB at a great price

VIDEO

Gainward GeForce GTX 1070 Phoenix "GLH"
$689 *gainward.net*
Better performance than a Titan for under $700

POWER

Corsair VS650
$85 *corsair.com*
This affordable PSU delivers a clean and reliable source of energy

SOUND

Edifier Luna Eclipse speakers + Kingston HyperX Cloud Revolver headset $265 + $149
edifier.com/au/ www.kingston.com

STORAGE

OCZ Trion 480GB + 2TB HDD (any)
$195 + $95 *ocz.com*
A speedy gaming drive + heaps of storage

DISPLAY

AOC G2460PG
$565
aocmonitorap.com/v2015/au
24" of 144Hz, G-Sync glory

CASE

Fractal Design Define R5
$169 *fractal-design.com*
Our new favourite mid-tower

KEYBOARD

Steelseries Apex M500 $150 *steelseries.com*
One of the best mechanical keyboards we've ever used

MOUSE

Tt esports Level 10M
$89.95
au.ttesports.com
Our new fave mouse

TOTAL: **$3,291.95**

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- The Wall Street Journal Asia
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Wireless-AC5300
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$525 + $587 *intel.com www.pccasegear.com.au*

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MOBO

MSI Z170A XPower Gaming Titanium Edition

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Sexy, silver and super fast

RAM

Corsair Vengeance LPX 3600MHz 2 x 8GB with cooler

$399 *corsair.com*

That high speed will show real gains in large open world games

VIDEO

MSI GeForce GTX Sea Hawk EK X

$2618 *au.msi.com*

Sure, you'll need a custom water loop in your system, but you'll get top performance at utter silence in return

POWER

Silverstone 1500wST1500 Strider

$314 *silverstone.com*

1500W should be plenty for the three GPUs running alongside an overclocked CPU, as well as the storage within

SOUND

Creative Soundblaster ZxR

$389 *creative.com*

Paradigm Cinema 110 + Marantz SR5009 amp

$3299 *aussiehifi.com.au*

STORAGE

2x Samsung 960 Pro 2Tb M.2 SSD + 2x 4TB HDDs (any)

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DISPLAY

Asus ROG Swift PG27AQ

$1349 *asus.com.au*

This 4K panel comes with G-Sync and some of the fastest pixels in the biz

CASE

Cooler Master Cosmos II Ultra Tower **$415** *coolermaster.com*

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KEYBOARD

Corsair K95 Platinum RGB

$349 *corsair.com/en-au/*

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MOUSE

Razer Deathadder Elite

$99.95 *razerzone.com/au-en/*

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HEADPHONES

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$469 *www.astrogaming.com*

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fanatec.com/au-en/

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Our beloved Logitech controller is now impossible to find, but Saitek is still innovating

COCKPIT

Obutto oZone with Buttkicker Gamer 2 and TrackIR 5 Pro

$1100

You're going to need somewhere to mount your wheel and joystick, and the Obutto frame is a favourite of ours

PROJECTOR

Sony VPLVW1000ES

$25,999

sony.com.au

Sure, it's $26k and you'll need a big room to make the most of its huge image, but it's worth it when you see games running in 4K on a 3-metre-wide screen

VR

HTC Vive

$1350 *htcvive.com*

Until Oculus releases its Touch controllers, the Vive is the only all-encompassing VR experience

ROUTER

Asus RT-AC5300

$439 *asus.com.au*

It's expensive but worth it. MU-MINO technology, eight antennas that can be angled for best coverage, game prioritising – what more could you want?

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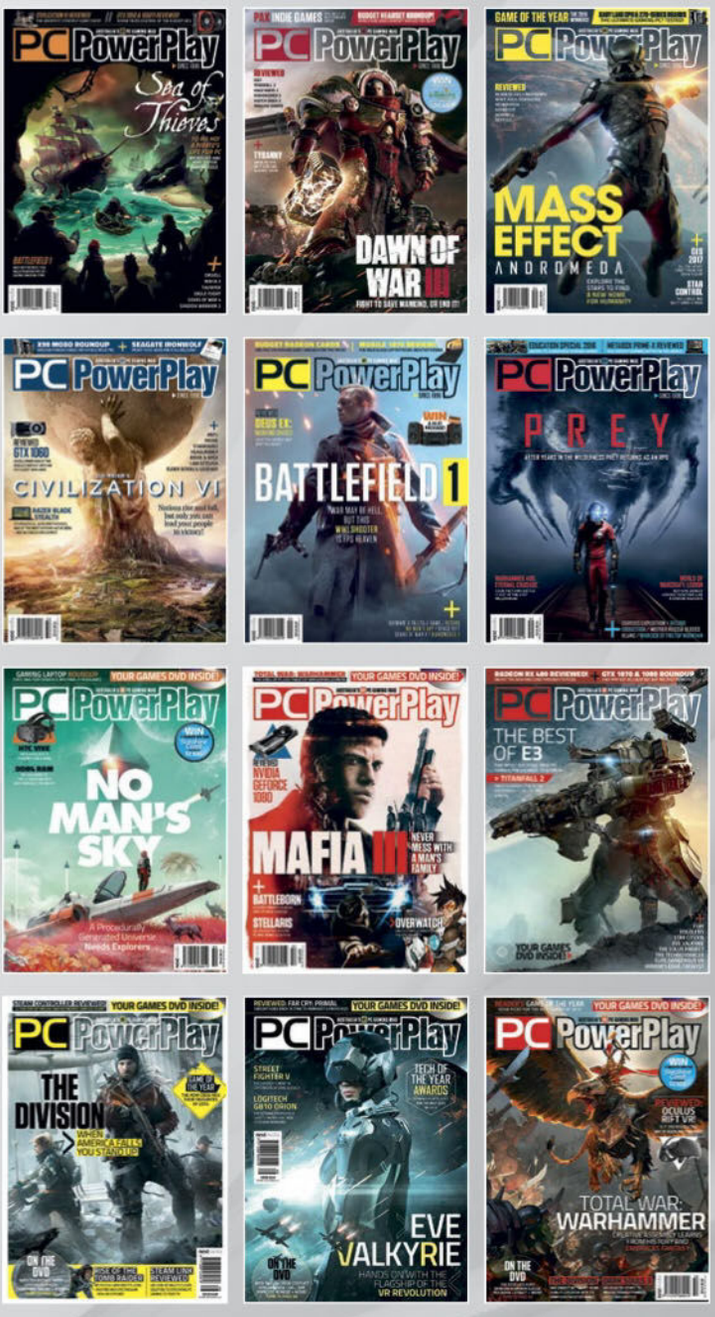

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Desperate To Offend

During the period 1996-2011 when Duke Nukem Forever consistently failed to be released, and we made jokes about it, a series was born. A series so desperate and eager to be edgy and offensive, it didn't so much court controversy as draft the likes of Gary Coleman and eventually even Uwe Boll, to help it shotgun-marry the very essence of outrage. The first game was meh. The sequel though, gained the ultimate free speech badge of honour: Postal 2 was banned from sale in Australia.

PORTAL 2

DEVELOPER RUNNING WITH SCISSORS
PERSONALITY VINCE DESI, MIKEJ, GARY COLEMAN (SERIOUSLY)
RELEASED 2003 AND A COUPLE OF TIMES SINCE
NUTSHELL Upping the ante from the original, Postal 2 crammed every stereotype about the ugliness of middle America into one likewise ugly Unreal 2 total conversion. Yet despite its puerile concept, these days it feels oddly reminiscent of one of gaming's most bankable open-world IPs...

Once there was a man name Vince Desiderio. That man had a dream. His dream was to be known as Vince Desi. After achieving that dream, he started on another dream: to create a videogame so offensive, but also so awesome, he would become world famous.

As the millennium dawned, the problem for edgy auteurs was that the wider culture was coming to terms with games. Games were becoming normalised. Ordinary, boring people were playing games. This was intolerable! Something had to be done!

Postal, an inconsistently-isometric level-based shooter, came out in 1997 to a reasonable degree of shrieking conservative self-righteousness, which must have pleased Vince Desi. The Postal Dude had to shoot up an air-force base, after all. And the game ended with him trying to massacre a bunch of kids in a school, and having his gun jam and the whole thing turn out to be a psychotic hallucination, because this was 1997 and not even Vince Desi was edgy enough to ask players to kill kids. (Pause to reflect on subsequent events far worse than the most depraved fiction.)

Anyway, Postal went away and people stopped talking about Running With Scissors and for Vince Desi and his producer MikeJ (sic) this, even more than the idea of office drones playing games, was the REAL outrage. So RWS got itself an Unreal 2 license and began putting together Postal 2.

Now, you have to remember that back in 2003, narrative FPS was all about escapism, right? Gamers wanted far off worlds or crazy dimensional-ripping antics, or to be a vampire or a cyborg or something. Yes, GTA Vice City was out there, but it was a far cry even from late 2004's San Andreas.

Then along comes Postal 2, a game with the central premise of... running errands for your horrible wife?

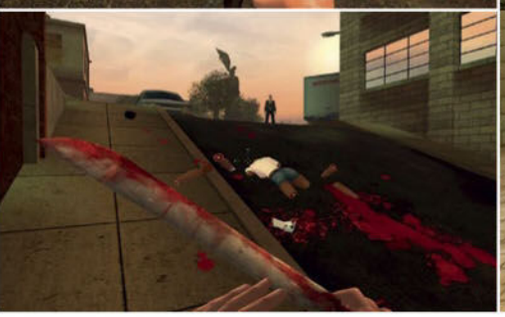
The game took place over a week in the life of Postal Dude, a trenchcoat-wearing nobody from a town called Paradise, Arizona. His attempt to just go and do a bunch of ordinary stuff is met with hostility, ridicule, violence, basically every stereotype of American behaviour that today would just be too obvious to parody. Though it will help you win an election, apparently.

Seriously, Postal 2 sounds like GTA V. It was a deliberately tasteless caricature of the real world, where the mildly annoying antics of our fellow citizens was blown way out of proportion. Sure, GTA V is all about awesome heists and what it's like trying to be an upstanding criminal in an uncaring, consumerist world, but all the set-dressing - the sexist billboards, the moronic radio show hosts, the pathetic puns, the fat joggers - all this stuff was in Postal 2, back in 2003.

Postal 2 was so outrageous that Australia banned its sale. So did New Zealand and Malaysia. And yet, Postal Dude was not introduced to the player mid-coitus with a mate's girlfriend in a filthy trailer. And when challenged, by his mate, on the issue of infidelity with said girlfriend, Postal Dude did not immediately stomp his mate to death, and then walk away to face absolutely no consequences whatsoever. GTA V's Trevor Phillips is introduced that way. As you well know.

Okay, so GTA V doesn't let the player grab a cat and shove it on the end of a rifle to function as a living suppressor (good for only nine shots, geddit?), or set an elephant on fire to spread fear and confusion. But that's not the point. The point is that this game, so offensive and outrageous in 2003, now comes across as merely dumb.

It even had a bizarre retro-celebrity



cameo before that kind of thing was made cool by, I guess, Henry Winkler in Arrested Development? The Fonz returned to TV screens just months after Postal 2's release, but Gary Coleman, of all people, was there on day one, inciting a riot in a police station. So was Osama Bin Laden, various references to other pop culture icons, and in the ultimate act of self-referential self-indulgence, Vince Desi and MikeJ themselves. MikeJ was even a boss. His office was in the toilet, because Never Punch Down. The Postal Dude worked for Running With Scissors, in the game, see. It's meta. You probably don't understand all the layers.

Anyway, in the markets that let Postal 2 go on sale, reception was... mixed. Because despite this ahead-of-its-time metatextuality (snort) and the way it hinted at how games could be so much more than fantasy or sci-fi or boring simulators, it was, in its original form at least, kind of crap. Just... not that good a game. That's the problem with games. They can't just be satire or commentary or a poke-in-the-eye for political correctness. They also have to be good games.

Unfortunately, Computer Gaming World gave it a zero, which was PR gold as far as Running With Scissors was concerned. They plastered that all over the box. Vince Desi and all his little wizards have, through an endless series of expansions and remakes, since made it their mission to court every disaffected anti-social yuks-a-plenty moron who takes PRIDE, actual PRIDE in the fact that Postal, as a fictional universe, is a place of dumb jokes. A place where you can unlock a "get yourself checked for gonorrhoea" sub-quest by urinating anywhere in the game world. Oh what's that? No no, you don't get POINTS for urinating on homeless people or dismembered corpses! In fact you can get through the entire game without using any violence at all! (Cue adenoidal chuckling and a yowl as another cat is inserted, anus-first, onto a shotgun.)

> "Postal 2, a game with the central premise of... running errands for your horrible wife"

Of course there's a Postal 3. Co-developed with some mob called TrashMasters and published by Akella by way of Steam, it came out in 2011 and augmented the recently defunct Osama Bin Laden with a new satirical antagonist ripped from the headlines... uh, Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez? [Checks research.] Yes. That seems to be correct. Hugo Chavez. Whatever, Postal 3 was critically panned and Vince Desi has since disowned it. As in, he had it deleted from the Running With Scissors website and literally told fans to save their money. Work on the Postal franchise continues to this day.

So, in hindsight, was Postal 2 really ahead of its time, John the Baptist to GTA V's (anti) Christ? Or were Vince Desi and MikeJ and Gary Coleman and a subculture of powerless pallid 20-somethings too disaffected to even be properly angry about anything, just a little quicker than the rest of us to embrace true artistic honesty?

Postal 2 is no GTA V. Because behind the "jokes", it's so grim, so cheerless. It ends in a realisation of our most suppressed and atavistic fear of all - nuclear fire. At the core, it's a basic story about an unhappy man who has a terrible life he can never escape or improve.

That's right. For people trying to understand society in 2017, Postal 2 is just too damn real. *ANTHONY FORDHAM* PC

EVERYONE IS SO GLAD THEY DID THE POSTAL FILM WITH "FUCKIN" UWE BOLL

Gaming has given us many amazing cultural moments. For instance, Postal 2 inspired awesome filmmaker Uwe Boll to make Postal, the movie. It's a great movie! Among other things, it explains how Flight 11 hit the North Tower on September 11 due to a humorous misunderstanding between the hijackers and the passengers. The hijackers only wanted to go to the Bahamas! Hahaha! This film came out in 2007! Hahaha! When asked about the possibility of making another Postal movie, MikeJ said (in a 2016 Reddit AMA so all quotes sic): "yes hoping on another movie, not with uwe! we wanna make our own!" To which Redditor ravingStork said: "Hahaha! Fuckin' uwe". To which MikeJ said: "fuckin uwe is right!"

Breaking the Law, Breaking the Law

DANIEL WILKS doesn't have any money to sue for

If you follow games journalism and Internet drama you'll probably be familiar with the case of Digital Homicide v. Jim Sterling. If not, the short version is that Jim Sterling (nee James Stanton) was extremely critical of a terrible game by Digital Homicide, there was some back and forth and it ended up with the owner of Digital Homicide and a number of other "developers" attempting to sue Sterling for "assault, libel and slander", initially for 10 million dollars but later revising that amount up to 15 million. In February the suit was dismissed with prejudice, meaning that Digital Homicide could not attempt to sue Sterling again for the same perceived infractions.

Though this case was patently ridiculous, and no matter how abrasive Sterling can be in his Youtube videos nothing he said amounted to anything like libel or slander, let alone abuse, there was still a number of us in the industry watching the case from a distance with interest and a small undercurrent of dread. While there was very little doubt that the case would be thrown out or that Digital Homicide would have lost, it still could have set a new precedent for something that is all too common in the industry – people trying to influence (at best) or silence (at worst) the opinions of any critical voices.

By and large the overt attempts at silencing critics is reserved for new media, in which it is easier to use automated systems such as DMCA attacks to take down or block offending content, but there are those in the print realm who still try and silence those who may not agree with the company line.

Many moons ago, when the Earth was young and I was starting my career in magazines, things were different. Many distributors of both games and tech openly tried intimidation techniques to get scores they didn't agree with changed. In 2001 or 2002 or so I ran something called the $1500 challenge in PCPP. The idea was that system builders would put together a complete gaming machine for $1500 or less and we would benchmark them all to discover the best. One company, who shall remain nameless because I can't remember and couldn't be bothered looking it, up submitted a PC with a terribly underpowered CPU, no GPU and so little ram it could barely boot. Understandably I slammed the machine. Luckily everything I wrote that wasn't opinion was entirely factual, so when the system builder in question threatened to sue both myself and Next Media as a whole, the boss at the time was ready and willing to throw our lawyers at the problem until it went away. The eventual lawsuit didn't eventuate but the system builder wanted me to print a retraction, review the PC again and give it a good score, and to financially reimburse him for lost revenue because nobody wanted to spend $1500 on such an underpowered machine.

▲ This game and others like it apparently would have earned the developer millions

A few years later I was threatened with both a lawsuit and physical violence if I didn't print a retraction and give a better score to a terrible gamepad that broke within hours of being plugged in. Talk to any journo who was working in the late 90s, early 00s and they will most likely have similar stories of threats both veiled and overt. As the years have drawn on, the types of pressure that developers, distributors and manufacturers try to exert grew more and more subtle. Some try and guarantee positive coverage by trying to go through the advertising department for editorial content (our ad guys always put editorial queries straight through to editors), to withholding products until after release dates to ensure that what might be a critical voice is only heard after the critical early period has expired. This is what appears to have happened to us in the case of CoD: Infinite Warfare. For weeks leading up to release we requested code with no response, then, a few weeks after release we had contact again and offers of review code. From what I understand, as a territory, Australia gave Infinite the lowest aggregated score of anywhere, even without our contribution. We may have a history of being quite critical of the series, but hell, we may have been the review to bring the average up if we had code on time.

> "I was threatened with both a lawsuit and physical violence if I didn't print a retraction"

There is also the matter of blacklisting, something that it's far more common than it should be. I can understand companies being protective of their IP, but blacklisting outlets that don't have a positive opinion ultimately doesn't help anyone. Developers don't get critical feedback, the public doesn't get a range of opinions and publishers make themselves look petty. It's all bad but it still goes on.

I breathed a sigh of relief when the Digital Homicide affair was finally put to bed. The last thing the games industry needs is a developer successfully suing a critic for doing his job. PC

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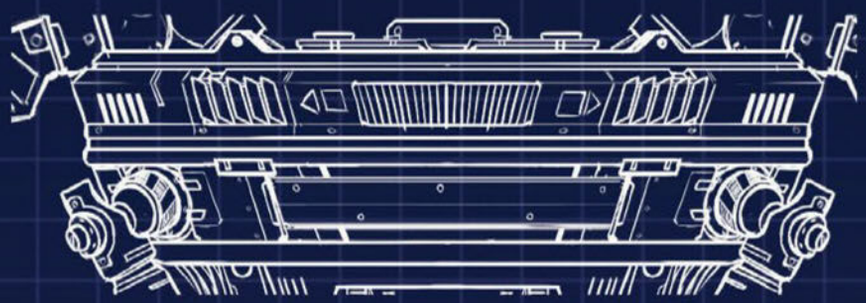

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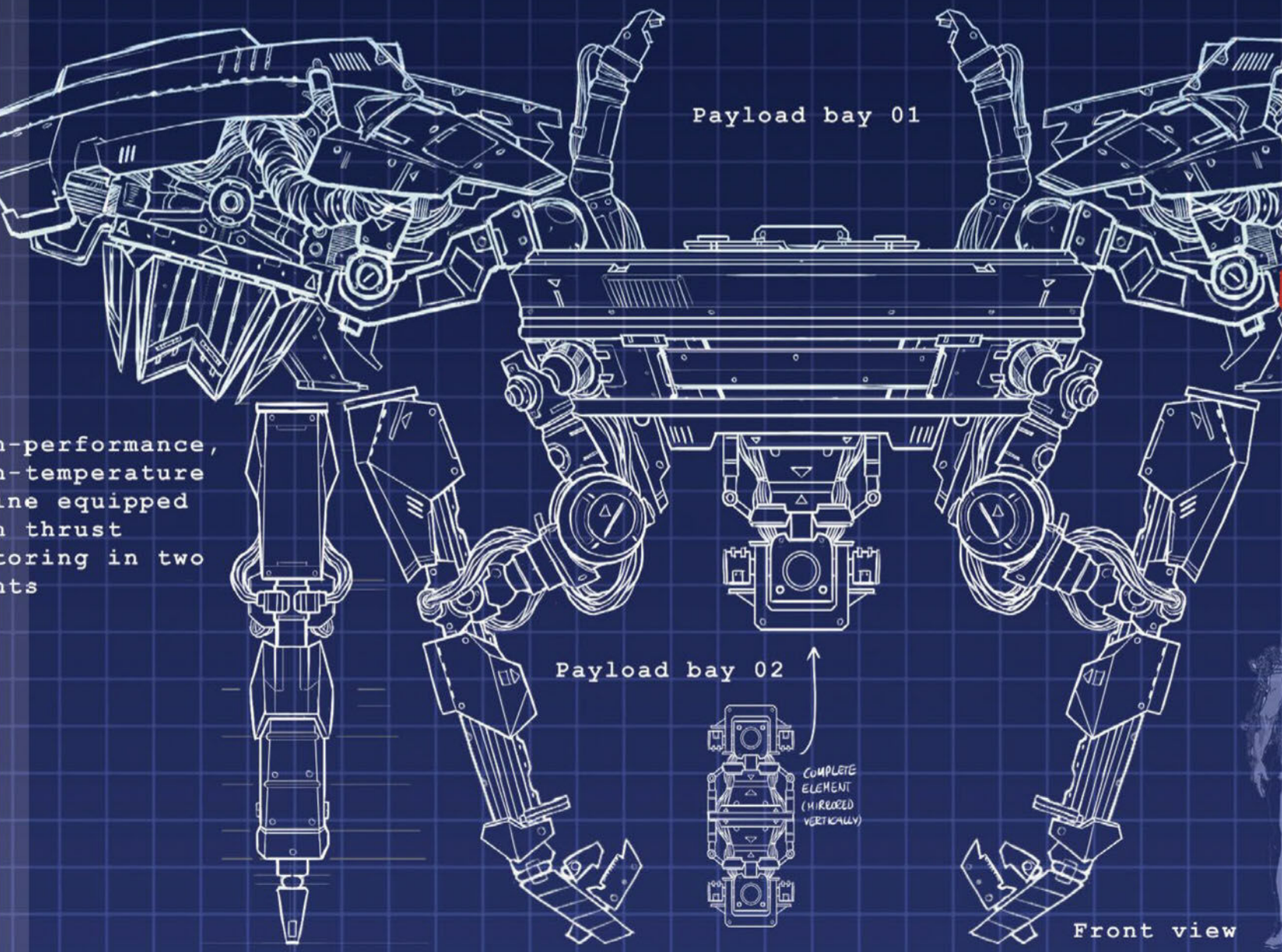

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